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The University of San Francisco

EMERGENT THEMES IN IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT FOR TRANSGENDER WOMEN OF  
COLOR: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

A Clinical Dissertation Presented to

The University of San Francisco

School of Nursing and Health Professions

Department of Integrated Healthcare

PsyD Program in Clinical Psychology

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Psychology

By  
Angel Tseng  
San Francisco  
July 2020



# Emergent Themes in Identity Development for Transgender Women of Color:

## An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

### Abstract

Transgender women of color have been at the forefront of LGBT rights moments in the U.S. and has been credited for leading the Stonewall resistance (Roberts, 2018). Though much has changed since Stonewall, transgender women of color still face harassment, discrimination, and many other barriers and health risks today. One of the many challenges faced by transgender women of color is identity conflict. The purpose of the study was to examine the identity development processes of transgender women of color. This qualitative research study utilized Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to explore the lived experiences and narratives of individuals from this community through in-depth interviewing. The current study examined the interactions of racial-cultural identity and gender identity for 5 transgender women of color. The final analysis yielded 9 superordinate themes: (1) early experiences and environmental factors, (2) influence of family, race, and culture, (3) experiences with majority norms while holding minority identities, (4) lack of visibility and representation, (5) transitioning, (6) responses to discrimination, (7) after transitioning, (8) dating and relationships, (9) community. This study provides knowledge on the dynamic processes of identity development of transgender women of color and serves as a base from which to develop a theory for identity development. In addition, data from this study can be used for clinical guidance and can assist individual transgender women of color in their own meaning-making of their identity formation journeys.

*Keywords: Transgender, Women, Identity Development*

This dissertation, written under the direction of the candidate's dissertation committee and approved by the members of the committee, has been presented to and accepted by the faculty of the PsyD Program in Clinical Psychology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Psychology. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

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## **Specific Aims**

### **Identification of Problem**

Transgender women of color have been at the forefront of LGBT rights moments in the U.S. and have been credited for leading the Stonewall resistance (Roberts, 2018). Though much has changed since Stonewall, transgender women of color still face harassment, discrimination, and many other barriers and health risks today. One of the many challenges faced by transgender women of color is identity conflict. Due to the intersection of minority identities that they hold, transgender women of color are at higher risk for mental health issues than the general population (LaMartine, Brennan-Ing, & Nakamura, 2018). This is due to the additional barriers and discrimination transgender women of color are up against, and not because gender identity confusion itself equates adverse symptoms or behaviors. The current literature and research lack a model for conceptualizing the identity development process of transgender women of color. As each of us are social beings and live in community with others, a tremendous amount of our energy is devoted to being psychologically engaged with others; there is a need for one to be witnessed and mirrored (Devor, 2013). Each of us need to be witnessed for who we are, and want to see ourselves mirrored in others' eyes as we see ourselves. When this process works well, we feel validated and confirmed - our sense of self is reinforced (Poland, 2000). When the messages one receives back are negative or do not match one's internal experience, such is the experience of many transgender women of color, various kinds of psychological distress and maladaptive behaviors can result.

### **Brief Rational and Alignment with Jesuit mission**

This study aimed to address the gap that exists in the literature and include the voices and experiences of transgender women of color. This study is in accordance with University of San

Francisco's Jesuit mission of social justice, as its purpose is to serve a community that has been historically marginalized and lacks resources.

### **Overview of Proposed Approach**

The purpose of the study was to examine the identity development processes of transgender women of color. This qualitative research study utilized Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to explore the lived experiences and narratives of individuals from this community through in-depth interviewing. It was hoped this study would serve as a foundation for building a theoretical model on the identity development of transgender women of color.

### **Expected Outcome**

This study provided knowledge on the dynamic processes of identity development of transgender women of color. The results of this study may serve as a base from which to develop a theory for identity development. In addition, data from this study can be used for clinical guidance and can assist individual transgender women of color in their own meaning-making of their identity formation journeys.



## **CHAPTER I**

### **Introduction to the Study**

Transgender populations face significant barriers in the U.S. According to a 2015 survey conducted by the National Center for Transgender Equality, 29% of transgender people live in poverty, compared to 14% of the general population, and more than 30% of transgender people report being homeless at some point in their lives (NCTE, 2015). Transgender people also experience unemployment rates at three times the rate of the general population, with transgender people of color experiencing up to four times the national unemployment rate. The transgender community also face discrimination as a gender minority. Approximately 30% of transgender people report being wrongfully terminated, denied a promotion, or receiving mistreatment in the workplace due to their gender identity in the past 12 months (NCTE, 2015). Transgender women are at higher risk for discrimination, violence (e.g. sexual, physical) and health disparities (LaMartine, Brennan-Ing, & Nakamura, 2018). Experiences of discrimination are common among transgender women of color, and the combination of anti-trans bias and structural racism can result in devastating mental health outcomes (LaMartine et al., 2018). Over 40% of respondents reported having attempted suicide in their lifetime, which is nine times the attempted suicide rate in the United States.

When considering the intersection of minority identities that a transgender women of color hold, it is not surprising that transgender women of color face shockingly high rates of homelessness and incarceration. Most states in the United States offer little to no legal protection over this sensitive community in housing, employment, or health care (National Equality Map, 2018). As mental health professionals work to support this community, more and more research and resource needs are beginning to surface. Changes in the health field are slow

but improving. In 2013, the diagnosis of Gender Identity Disorder was removed from the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* and replaced with Gender Dysphoria (4<sup>th</sup> ed., text rev; DSM-IV-TR) (American Psychiatric Association, 2000; American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In 2015, the American Psychological Association established 16 basic guidelines for transgender-affirmative psychological care (APA, 2015). This guideline offered an introduction for clinicians seeking to provide sensitive care for transgender and gender-conforming (TGNC) clients. As clinicians continue to work with TGNC clients, cisgender identified clinicians (who comprise many clinicians) must find frameworks and resources that are sensitive and specific to this community.

In this researcher's clinical work with the transgender community in the San Francisco Bay Area, I found that many TGNC-identified clients came in reporting additional distress and anguish due to the discrimination they face and the limited representation they have in society and the medical and mental health field. When working with any individual from a minority background, the clinician must adopt a culturally sensitive framework. In recent years there have been LGBT identity development models created for understanding the experiences and transitioning of LGBT folks (Cass, 1984; Devor, 2004). However, the literature has been primarily focused on the LGB communities.

While few researchers have begun their pioneering work in transgender theory and transgender identity models (e.g., Devor's transsexual identity development model (2005), which is derived from Cass's (1984) lesbian identity model), there has been little to no research examining the experiences of transgender women of color. Risman (2004) stated that "one must always take into consideration multiple axes of oppression; to do otherwise presumes the whiteness of women, the maleness of people of color, and the heterosexuality of everyone." (p.

442) Transgender women of color sit at the intersection of these minority identities and experience the highest health and safety risks in the United States.

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of transgender women of color as they navigated their life journey and made meaning of their identity development. This study aimed to gather emergent themes and patterns in the identity formation of transgender women of color.



## **CHAPTER II**

### **The Review of the Literature**

This literature review discusses the development of identity development models in the field of psychology. The concept of identity has been defined as an internalized psychic system that integrates one's inner self and the external social world into a congruent whole (Leary, 2003). It is the beliefs, personality, qualities, and values that make a person. The literature review also explores the expansion of these identity models into racial and ethnic minority development models, and more recently, LGBT identity theories. From Freud's (1905) original psychosexual stages, to Erikson's theory of development (1905), to Cross's (1971) Nigrescence model, to Cass's (1984) theory of gay and lesbian identity development, we draw from the literature to examine the field's process in approaching the experiences of minority identities, and whether the literature captures the intersectionality of transgender women of color.

### **Identity Development**

The question of what constitutes identity and what the formation of identity looks like has been explored and answered by many researchers and theorists throughout history. A common thread across the different theoretical and empirical approaches to understanding how identities form and function seeks to understand the entity that enables one to move with purpose and direction in life, with a sense of continuity and internal coherence over time (Kroger & Marcia, 2011). What is the significance of understanding identity and its formation? For mental health professionals and the field of psychology, the understanding identity development and its formation is crucial to the support of one's general health and well-being. One's identity speaks to the individual's internal strength and can function as a major protective factor against risk for mental health issues or maladaptive behaviors (Schwartz, Luyckx, & Vignoles, 2011). Through

the constitution of identity, clinicians and researchers have a lens into an individual's degree of positive self-esteem, moral reasoning, social functioning, and management of difficult emotion states, including anxiety and depression (Schwartz, Luyckx, & Vignoles, 2011). The study of identity development is therefore an important factor when treating mental health disorders and the human psyche.

In this section, we examine the history of identity development in the field of psychology, including the most prominent and commonly referred models of identity development. Because there currently does not exist an identity development model for transgender women of color, we consider the models available and whether these models are able to capture the identity development experiences for these individuals.

### **Identity Development Models**

Identity development is an area of human development that has been heavily researched and debated in the field of psychology. The majority of identity development research has stemmed from Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory of identity and on James Marcia's empirical operationalization of these ideas (Schwartz, Luyckx, & Vignoles, 2011). It is important to note that Erikson's pioneering of identity theory is an expansion on Freud's psychosexual theory of development; however, Erikson's work is credited as the first to use the concept of ego identity and sparked the exploration of what constitutes a healthy identity/personality development (Schwartz, Luyckx, & Vignoles, 2011).

Erikson's psychosocial stages categorized human development throughout the lifespan in 8 stages. Of significance for the current study was the stage that pinpoints the exploration of identity is seen in the adolescence stage (13-21 years), wherein Erikson theorizes that the main conflict that one must resolve is that of identity versus role confusion. Erikson's theory posits

that the individual goes through an exploratory phase where they develop a sense of independence and a sense of self. Ego identity, defined as the conscious sense of self developed through social interaction, is developed during this stage as the individual's conscious sense of self is developed through interactions with peers, authority, and the larger society (Erikson, 1959). Erikson (1959) asserts that if one is unable to achieve "identity cohesion," defined as a strong sense of self and consistent set of values and beliefs, then one is at risk for role confusion. Erikson suggests that if an individual fail to resolve the conflict of identity versus role confusion and remains in role confusion, one may be more susceptible to risky behaviors, poor social functioning, and poorer quality of life.

James Marcia (1966) elaborated on Erikson's adolescent stage, identity versus role confusion, and established four 'identity statuses' to describe the process of identity formation. Erikson had suggested that the conflict that takes place in adolescence is the opposition between identity achievement or confusion, whereas Marcia proposes that this stage is better understood as the extent to which one has explored and committed to an identity (Schwartz, Luyckx, & Vignoles, 2011). These four statuses are called "achievement," "moratorium," "foreclosure," and "diffusion." Each status describes the exploration of alternative sets of goals, values, beliefs and the commitments the individual chooses to make to integrate into their identity. Marcia's statuses operationalized and expanded what Erikson originally theorized on identity development in the adolescent stage. Erikson understood the phenomenon of human development as a sequence of stages, while Marcia suggested that there were different 'statuses' or commitments one may make during the process of identity development, and that these 'statuses' can change or be revisited (Marcia, 1966). Marcia asserts that Erikson's stage of identity versus role confusion is comprised of two action goals: exploration and commitment. 'Exploration' refers to

the consideration of potential values, beliefs, and goals, and commitment refers to adhering to them as a defined role. The status ‘achievement’ is therefore defined as an individual committing to a set role after a period of exploration. ‘Moratorium’ describes when one is actively exploring identity alternatives without strong current commitments. ‘Foreclosure’ refers to when the individual commits to an identity set without much prior exploration (i.e., when an adolescent takes on the political or religious views of their parents due to loyalty and respect for the parents, and not necessarily a commitment to these values). And finally, the status ‘diffusion’ can be likened to the identity confusion or crisis described by Erikson - here, the individual demonstrates an inability to explore or make commitments to a set of values or beliefs (Kroger & Marcia, 2011).

Erikson (1959) and Marcia’s (1966) theories of identity development became the most prominent in Western psychology during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Kroger and Marcia (2011) reviewed the generalizability of these four statuses and found through several longitudinal and cross-sectional studies that these statuses have been connected to distinct sets of personality, adjustment, and cognitive variables (Schwartz, Luyckx, & Vignoles, 2011). Other research and theories of identity are often an elaboration of, or response to, their initial work.

Recent research into identity development has expanded these initial models, or proposed new identity models altogether. Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, and Beyers (2006) broadened James Marcia’s (1966) original constructs and elaborated on the process of exploration and commitment to explain the breadth and depth of each process as individuals progress through identity formulation and development. Luyckx et al. (2011) found that these identity dimensions played different roles in a person’s selfhood at different times during the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Additional research has shown that with increasing age, the ‘self-

system', or one's sense of selfhood and identity, becomes more consolidated and integrated, with one's social relationships, environment, and culture (Schwartz, Kimstra, Luyckx, Hale, & Meeus, 2012). Still, other research spurred from Erikson's (1959) and Marcia's (1966) original theories. Other researchers have proposed that the exploration of different values and identity alternatives was less important in adolescence, and, instead, individuals in adolescence operate off a 'foreclosed commitment' which is internalized from the parents, or primary caregivers, and these commitments are reconsidered later in their identity development process (Kroger & Marcia, 2011). Marcia (1966) described the 'foreclosed commitment' status as when the individual commits to some roles, values or goals without exploration of a range of options (Marcia viewed this as a choice to conform to the expectations of others). The examination of these identity statuses that an individual can embark on in their identity development process did not stray far from Erikson's original theory of identity versus role confusion. The 'statuses' of reconsideration and ruminative exploration that were expanded by Kroger and Marcia (2011) and Schwartz, Klimstra, and colleagues (2011) demonstrated the role confusion stage described by Erikson - wherein the individual becomes 'immobilized by lack of clarity' in identity direction and becomes at risk for symptoms associated with anxiety and depression (Kroger & Marcia, 2011; Schwartz et al., 2011).

Still more researchers built on Erikson's (1959) and Marcia's (1966) models. Subsequent researchers drew the attention away from these 'status categories' and focused instead on processes (Schwartz, Luyckx, & Vignoles, 2011). Newer identity statuses were also developed from Marcia's (1966) original identity theory, and these were extracted from diverse populations of high school students, college students, emerging adults, young adults, and individuals with

chronic illnesses (Luyckx, Duriez, Klimstra, & De Witte, 2010; Luyckx et al., 2008). These studies offered construct validity to the identity development models.

In highlighting Erikson (1959) and Marcia's (1966) theories, one must consider the cultural implications of these models on individuals developing in different societal settings. For example, although most of the research was conducted in what is considered the 'Western' world, some discrepancies can be seen in some European countries versus the United States. For example, in many European countries the government offers a 'safety net' for those that cannot find work thus lessening the stress and pressure on the transition to adulthood that is present in the culture of the United States (Schwartz et al., 2011).

The significance of Erikson (1959) and Marcia's (1966) original work, and the subsequent expansions other researchers built on this work, is reflected in empirical studies conducted on adolescents and emerging adults in various communities. Identity confusion is found to be associated with more mental health risks and high-risk behaviors. Schwartz, Mason, Pantin and Szapocznik (2008, 2009) discovered that identity confusion was associated with heightened risk for initiating drug use and risky sex behaviors in a sample of Hispanic teens. Furthermore, another study found that sexual identity confusion was correlated with substance use, delinquent behaviors, and depressive symptoms (Rose, Rodgers, & Small, 2006). It is important to note that sexual identity confusion itself does not equate adverse symptoms or behaviors, it is the additional barriers, prejudice, and discrimination faced by individuals considering or identifying with non-heteronormative lifestyles that increases the risk of adverse events. Identity confusion has also been related to low self-worth, deviant and antisocial behaviors, and anxiety and depressive symptoms (Schwartz, Zamboanga, Weisskirch, Rodriguez, 2009). However, one must consider the distinction between temporary and chronic identity

confusion, as the former can lead to further exploration and eventual achievement of identity strength, while the later may require treatment and intervention (Schwartz et al., 2011).

When looking at the history of identity theories and identity development models in Western psychology, we can see the influence of western ideology in each model or theory. A prominent criticism of these theories is that it is constructed based on traditional Eurocentric individualistic culture. An emphasis on individualism permeates Western psychology. Erikson and Marcia's (1966) initial concerns over the adolescent's conquering of autonomy and independence is reiterated to the other models they have inspired. For example, concepts such as 'individualism' and 'linear evolution/improvement' are heavily emphasized. Erikson and Marcia models describe processes that are predominantly linear in their progression, through each "phase" or "status," and the development of identity is focused on the independence and accomplishments of the individual (Schwartz et al., 2011). Additionally, Erikson highlights identity in terms of the sexual and the occupational, which many interpret this as the goals to accomplish in the process of identity achievement. Many psychologists operate from the framework of these models in their clinical work, generalizing ideas from these identity models to patients of all genders and cultures.

### **Racial, Ethnic, and Cultural Identity Development**

To address the identity formation of people of color, subsequent researchers and psychologists expanded on the identity models established by Erikson (1959) and Marcia (1966). In considering the experiences of transgender women of color, it is important that we understand the identity models available for persons of color. The following section examines racial and ethnic identity models frequently used by psychologists in the literature.

Culture is comprised of a set of one's beliefs, values, attitudes, and experiences (Sue & Sue, 2015). Although there is a distinct difference between the terms 'racial identity,' which refers to one's physical characteristics such as skin color or bone structure, 'cultural identity,' which refers to one's cultural factors such as cultural factors or nationality, and 'ethnic identity,' which is closely related to cultural identity and refers to one's commitment or belonging to an ethnic group, the literature on identity development models for cultural, racial, and ethnic minorities frequently utilize these terms interchangeably. Cross and Cross (2008) adopted the abbreviation REC to indicate that "the discourses on racial, ethnic, and cultural identity overall at the level of the lived experience to the point that there is little reason to associate each construct with a distinct identity constellation" (Cross & Cross, 2008, p. 154). For this study, we refer to the language used from author to author. It is important to note that although there is a current distinction regarding the differences between terminology related to race and ethnicity, an observation made by the American Anthropological Association (AAA) highlights the fluctuating ambiguities, "today's ethnicities are yesterday's races," referring to the fuzz line between race and ethnicity (Schwartz et al., 2011). What the AAA is referring to is the fuzzy line between race and ethnicity. The AAA observed that people of Irish, Jewish, and Italian descent had at one time been considered to be non-white racial groups in the United States, yet are considered white or Caucasian today. The AAA makes the point that racial categories are socially constructed, and often positioned in relation to the majority white category (Schwartz, Luyckx, & Vignoles, 2011; Shih, Bonam, Sanchez, & Peck, 2007).

Ethnic identity, can be defined as an individual's identification with an ethnic or cultural group and share a cultural heritage, is important when considering the livelihood of ethnic or cultural minority groups in the United States. Here, when we refer to minority versus majority



groups, we are describing the status of the social group in a particular place. The ‘majority’ refers to the social group considered to have the most power in a particular place; namely, white or Caucasian people in the United States. Those in the majority group often hold more positions in power. A ‘minority’ group refers to the social group of people differentiated from the majority, whether in culture, race, religion, etc. A strong sense of ethnic identity supports members’ ability to make sense of their identity and sense of belonging within the larger society or dominant cultural group (Umana-Taylor, 2011).

Earlier researchers discovered that minority groups share similar patterns of adjustment to cultural oppression (Sue & Sue, 2015). Studies conducted in the U.S. have found steady increases in ethnic identity exploration and affirmation during adolescence and emerging adulthood (Schwartz et al., 2011). Studies have shown that ethnic identity exploration and affirmation are associated with increases in self-esteem and other prosocial behaviors (Schwartz et al., 2011). Moreover, a strong ethnic or racial-cultural identity offers members of minority groups a protective system that supports them through a society that can sometimes devalue and discriminate their identities. The existence of racial/cultural identity models draw together common themes in one’s process of overcoming internalized oppression, and provide a framework in the development of one’s awareness to their racial identity and its relationship to others.

Researchers have created different models of identity development for different racial or ethnic minority groups. Phinney (1990) conceptualized an adolescent ethnic identity development model which understood ‘subjective identity’ as a starting point which eventually lead to the development of a social identity that is based on ethnic group membership. Similar to Marcia’s (1966) theory of identity development, Phinney’s (1990) model included three stages:

an ethnic identity diffusion and foreclosure stage, an ethnic identity search stage, and an ethnic identity achievement stage. While Phinney's model presents an approach that encompasses all ethnic minority groups, which, while efficient, may have limitations in generalizability, other researchers have developed models for specific minority groups.

The three most common racial or ethnic identity models are: Cross's Nigrescence model (2001), the Asian American Racial Identity model (1971), and the Chicano/ Latino Ethnic Identity model (1990). Additionally, Sue and Sue's (2005) Racial/Cultural Identity Development Model, captures racial and cultural identity development across minority groups. Each of these models and theories is discussed in the following sections.

### **The Nigrescence Model (Cross, 2000)**

Cross's (2000) work was one of the more seminal work in racial identity theory upon which several models diverged or built upon. The psychological model of Nigrescence describes 5 stages: Pre-encounter, Encounter, Immersion/Emersion, Internalization, and Internalization-Commitment (Cross, 1971, 1978, 1991, 2000; Vandiver, Cross, Worrell, & Fhagen-Smith, 2002). The Pre-encounter stage describes the assimilation of white culture and the active or passive distancing of the individual from other blacks or black culture. The individual at this stage has absorbed many of the values of the dominant white culture. It is characterized by three identities, Assimilation, where race is not salient to the individual, Miseducation, where the individual has a negative mindset about the Black community, Self-Hate, where the individual views themselves negatively because of their race. The Encounter stage is commonly precipitated by events that force the individual to recognize the impact of racism, and therefore is forced to focus on their identity as a member of the minority group that is oppressed by the dominant group. At this stage, the individual may reconsider their social group memberships.

The Immersion/Emersion stage describes the individual as diving into their black culture and surrounding themselves with symbols, community, and values of the black culture. Anger towards the dominant group is typically lessened at this point, as the focus is on the integration of their own cultural identity. This stage depicts two identities, Intense Black Involvement and Anti-White. Next, the Internalization stage is the re-connection with society outside of their black peers. In this stage, the individual is open to connections with white people who are respectful of their racial identity. The Internalization stage has three identities: Black Nationalist, Biculturalist, and Multiculturalist Inclusive. This individual may also seek out coalitions with other oppressed minorities. Lastly, the internalization-commitment stage describes the individual's commitment to a 'plan of action' to social justice and advocating for the concerns of their community. Here we can see that Cross has laid out a foundational map of how many black people may experience their racial identity development. In the following models, we see the influence of Cross's work as it is adapted to other minority groups.

### **The Asian American Racial Identity Model (Sue & Sue, 1971)**

Sue and Sue's (1971) Asian American Racial Identity Development Model (AARID) provided an identity development model for Asian Americans. The AARID contains 5 stages - the ethnic awareness stage, the white identification stage, the awakening to social political consciousness stage, the redirection stage, and the incorporation stage. The first stage, Ethnic Awareness, is said to emerge in early toddlerhood, where the individual's family members serve as the significant ethnic group model. The White Identification stage begins with the individual's awareness of "differentness" as individuals encounter white society and are faced with prejudice and a desire for assimilation. Phinney (1990) found that a high percentage of Asian American adolescents reported that they would change their race to white if they could

and, of this sample, Asian American adolescents felt less ethnic pride than other minority groups. The third stage of the AARID, the Awakening to Social Political Consciousness stage marks the individual's departure from wanting to identify with white society, and instead begins to understand and identify with oppression and oppressed groups (Sue & Sue, 2005). The redirection stage is described as a period where the individual reconnects with their Asian American heritage and culture. Anger against white society may occur in this stage as individuals begin to realize the impact of oppression and discrimination on their identity in earlier years. Finally, the Incorporation stage is described as the 'highest form' of identity achievement. This is similar to the internalization-commitment stage outlined by Cross' (2000) Nigrescence model. This stage calls for a positive cultural identity and a nuanced reconciliation with white individuals who affirm and recognize their racial identity.

### **The Chicano/Latino Ethnic Identity Model (Ruiz, 1990)**

Ruiz's (1990) Latino/a American identity development model proposes 5 stages of ethnic identity development. Ruiz developed the model utilizing a clinical population, unlike other racial/ethnic identity models. Stage one, the Casual stage, described as a period when the individual struggles with a lack of positive affirmations of their ethnic identity and fails to identify with Latino culture. During stage two, the Cognitive stage, the individual inadvertently assimilates damaging beliefs about the Latino heritage based on negative influences from the majority culture. These negative cognitive distortions include the association of the Latino group with poverty and prejudice, the assimilation of majority society as a means of survival, and the belief that success can only come from assimilation. Next is the Consequence stage. This stage is described as a period which individuals experience fragmentation - there is a general feeling of negative self-image and rejection of heritage. This is followed by the Working-Through stage

where two conflicts arise - the individual experiences psychological distress over identity conflict, and the individual can no longer tolerate assimilation with the white majority culture. Finally, the Successful Resolution stage describes the acceptance of positive cultural identity and an increase in self-esteem. We can see that like Cross's (2001) Nigrescence model and Sue's (1971) AARID model, Ruiz's (1990) model follows a similar pattern of confronting internalized oppression and integrating positive views with one's minority culture to achieve an integrated and positive identity.

These three models described in this section thus far, Cross's Nigrescence model, Sue and Sue's Asian American Racial Identity model, and Ruiz's Chicano/Latino Ethnic Identity model, are amongst the most referred models when considering ethnic or racial identity development. Each model considers how ethnic or racial minority groups relate to the majority white culture. This is an interesting pattern that is consistent with all racial/ethnic identity theories. Because minority groups experience oppression and subjugation by the dominant majority group, minority identity development must contend with the minority person finding reconciliation and belonging in their environment. These models based their developmental phases on the minority person's interaction with the majority group and culture, and discuss the impact of oppression and discrimination as integral to the minority person's identity formation. This is similarly reflected in gender identity models and theories, where the developmental phases highlight the struggles of reconciling with a majority culture that is heteronormative and gender dichotomous. Further, each of the ethnic and racial identity models and theories described in this section possess strengths and weaknesses that are of importance to consider. The models provide a framework for understanding how racial/ethnic minorities navigate their life experiences in a majority environment. One which often discriminates against their own

group. The models also serve as a guide for psychologists in understanding clients who possess racial, ethnic and cultural identities different than their own. There are, however, several limitations within each model. One limitation of the models is their lack of ability to capture the varying within-group differences of each minority group. For example, in Sue and Sue's (1971) Asian American Racial Identity model, there lacks an attention to the different Asian ethnic groups that exist in just the U.S. Sue and Sue (1971) does make the distinction that the model is a racial identity model and not an ethnic identity model, but this still leaves the question of whether within group differences under the larger umbrella of the Asian race would affect differences in each group's progression through their identity development. For example, the most prominent philosophy in China is Buddhist values, whilst the predominant religion in the Philippines is Catholicism. It stands to reason that these major differences in philosophy and belief systems would impact one's identity formation. Similarly, Ruiz's (1990) Chicano Latino Ethnic Identity model also generalizes the experiences of different countries and nations and their respective cultural views. It should also be noted that the Latino/a identity model may be dated in its name alone - in many communities, the move to identifying as Latinx has been rising to be inclusive of those that identify outside of the gender binary. The Chicano Latino Ethnic Identity model does not specifically address gender, it lacks inclusivity in its framework (Sue & Sue, 2015).

Despite these limitations, there is a strong parallel between each of these models. Each model begins with stages of internalized racism and oppression. First, there is identification and relationship with the majority culture, as minority persons struggle to fit into the world around them. Then, there is a deviation away from the majority group and reconnection with respective minority heritages, as minority persons confronts oppression and internalized stigma. Next,

there is a “working-through” or reconciliation of anger towards members of the majority group, and finally the eventual reconciliation and positive identity achievement that successfully integrates the heritages and values of both minority and majority culture.

### **The Racial/Cultural Identity Development Model (Sue & Sue, 2005)**

Based on the similarities and the parallels between each of the three models in this chapter, Atkinson, Morten, and Sue’s (1979, 1989, 1999) Racial/Cultural Identity Development Model (R/CID) was created and encompasses all minority groups in the U.S. The R/CID model is not a comprehensive personality theory, but serves as a conceptual model for helping therapists understand their culturally different clients’ attitudes and behaviors (Sue & Sue, 2015).

Sue and Sue (2015) observed that minority groups shared similar patterns of adjustment to cultural oppression, and developed a five-stage Racial/Cultural Identity Development Model (R/CID). This model includes five stages of development that ethnic minority groups navigate in understanding themselves in relation to their own culture, the dominant culture, and the relationship between the majority and the minority. The stages are: Conformity, Dissonance, Resistance and Immersion, Introspection, and Integrative Awareness. Each stage presents the conflict and experience of the individual as they examine and explore their sense of self in relation to others of the same group, of another minority group, and of majority group members.

In the Conformity Stage, there is a desire to assimilate to the lifestyles and value systems of white society; those of their own heritage may be regarded with contempt or low salience. At this stage, there is an internalization of majority views of the individual’s minority status. Internalized oppression is common at this stage, where minority members believe the discriminatory stereotypes projected by the majority culture. Sue and Sue (2015) make the assertion that this phenomenon is in response to the “dominant-subordinate relationship”

between two different cultures, and that it is not uncommon for members of one group to adapt to the group possessing power to survive. Sue and Sue (2015) also assert that individuals at this stage are victims of “ethnocentric monoculturalism,” the belief that the majority group’s cultural heritage is superior, and the majority group has the means and power to impose these values on less powerful groups.

The second stage of the R/CID (Sue & Sue, 2005), Dissonance, is described as a time-period during which the individual becomes conflicted with disparate information about their racial identity. There is an acknowledgement and awareness of racism and contradictory information. As we’ve seen in the racial/ethnic identity models earlier this chapter, the minority person during this stage becomes aware of the oppression of their group and the discrimination they’ve faced because of it.

Next, the Resistance and Immersion Stage of the R/CID (Sue & Sue, 2005) is described as when the individual rejects all dominant views and endorses only minority values. The individual here is apt to reject all things related to the majority culture. This stage is often riddled with feelings of shame, guilt, and anger. One may feel guilt and shame for once disavowing one’s personal culture and identifying with the majority group that has oppressed them. Anger is directed towards the institution of racism and oppression. In this stage, the individual resists the majority culture and immerses and reconnects with their cultural heritage.

The Introspection stage R/CID (Sue & Sue, 2005) is characterized as the individual’s evaluation of the balance of their commitment to majority and minority views and lifestyles. The individual focuses on autonomy and individual expression of culture, and invests less energy in holding anger for the majority culture. This stage is described as ‘proactive’ versus ‘reactive.’ Compared to the previous stage, the Introspection stage is marked with reflection and intentional



action towards felt oppression and discrimination, while the previous stage is marked by one's initial reactive emotions to the oppressor.

The final stage R/CID (Sue & Sue, 2005) Integrative Awareness, is described as a period during which the individual experiences an inner sense of security, autonomy and racial pride. The minority individual in this stage continues to take a proactive stance and builds connections with members of other oppressed groups as well as supportive members of the dominant group.

The racial, ethnic and cultural identity developmental models discussed so far, demonstrate the identity development models that are currently available for psychologists in their clinical work with minority groups. Park-Taylor and Ponterotto (2007) evaluated the current racial and ethnic identity theory, measure, and research and discussed its present status and future implications. The study presented that these models, or the models that have influenced or inspired these models, have been operationalized into measures and normed on its respective populations. For example, Cross's most recent psychological nigrescence model (2001) inspired the Cross Racial Identity Scale (Cross & Vandiver, 2001; Vandiver et al., 2002) that was normed in multiple samples of African American participants since its initial in 1995. In its final stage, it was validated by a sample of 336 African American college students. West-Olatunji et al. (2007) utilized a case study approach using the Racial/Cultural Identity Development model in the analysis of an interview with a young, adult, Vietnamese immigrant. The RCID model is highly cited and recommended in several articles for counseling psychology. While the literature is still lacking in the use of the racial/ethnic identity models on non-clinical populations, the current proposed study will utilize the commonalities found in these models, such as the re-occurring themes of the stages, to inform the development of semi-structured interview questions for a non-clinical sample population.

**Intersectionality Theory**

As this proposed study focused on transgender women of color, consideration was paid towards the varied components of their identities, including belonging to a racial minority group and a gender identity minority group. This study therefore aimed to explore the intersectionality of these different identity statuses for transgender women of color.

In considering how racial or gender identities impact one's experiences of themselves, with others, and with the world, it is important to recognize the effects of holding multiple marginalized identities. A singular and insulated identity development model does not capture the dynamic experiences, and tensions, between different aspects of one's identity. In a case study conducted by Chi-Rou Huang (2017), it was observed that the result of these isolated models was two "disparate and seemingly incompatible theoretical narratives." Models of racial identity development are typically normed on heterosexual and cisgender populations, and do not consider the impact of negative gender stereotypes within minority cultures. Additionally, as will be discussed in the following chapter, sexual orientation or gender identity development models are tested and normed with mostly white populations. These limitations can directly affect and exclude the experiences of most transgender people, specifically transgender people of color.

Intersectionality is a framework that attempts to identify how interlocking systems of power impact those who are most marginalized in society (Chi-Rou Huang, 2017). Intersectionality considers the various minority statuses that an individual or group may hold, whether it be class, race, age, disability, sexual orientation, or gender (Cooper, 2016). The origins of the intersectionality framework, and theories, grew out of feminist and womanist scholars of color. In the early 1970s, it was observed that most feminist literature and scholars

gravitated toward middle-class, educated, white women. Before the intersectionality framework, additive and/or multiplicative frameworks were frequently applied towards individuals possessing multiple minority identities. The additive perspective represented the concept that minority identity statuses act independently from each other and combined to shape one's experiences (Parent, DeBlaere, & Moradi, 2013). The perspective for both multiplicative and additive perspectives emphasized that minority statuses, and minorities' experiences, could be categorized and conceptualized as separate dimensions, which then interact to affect or exacerbate the other. Such perspectives were limiting when applied to individuals with multiple minority identities, as studies (Crenshaw, 1994) demonstrated that multiple minority identities and minority experiences, interact and fuse together to make a new dimension different than the singular separate minority identities.

The evolution of intersectionality as a theoretical framework has been attributed to Black feminist responses and the recognition of the intersections of gender with varied dimensions of identity (Shields, 2008). One of the fundamental principles of intersectionality is that multiple identities are not a discrete set of separate identities, like beads on a string, but rather a relationally defined, overlapping, and emergent phenomenon (Shields, 2008). This is directly in contrast to the additive and multiplicative perspectives that multiple identities within an individual can be experienced separately. The literature on intersectionality encourages an understanding of the qualitative differences among various intersectional identities, and encourages us to go beyond the simple or singular inference about one's multiple identities. For example, the notion that a Black woman is 'twice as disadvantaged' than a Black man. While the theory was initially used for considering different identities in relation to gender, intersectionality has become an increasingly utilized approach in the examination of multiplying

features and facets that inform social identities. As Shields (2008) states, “it is not race-class-gender, but also age, ableness, sexual orientation, etc.” (p.303) Additionally, Risman (2004) summarizes his considerations of intersectionality, “there is now considerable consensus growing that one must always take into consideration multiple axes of oppression; to do otherwise presumes the whiteness of women, the maleness of people of color, and the heterosexuality of everyone.” (p. 442)

Kimberle Crenshaw, a leading scholar in critical race theory, is credited for the introduction and development of intersectionality theory in its more popular form. In works on intersectionality and the experience of women of color, Crenshaw differentiates structural intersectionality from political intersectionality (1994/2005). Structural intersectionality is defined as the ways in which one’s social needs and legal status marginalizes them, notably due to the convergence of multiple identities. In illustrating structural intersectionality, Crenshaw provides an example of women of color seeking counseling for sexual assault, where it was less likely for low-income women of color to receive assistance since the resources were being allocated to racially and economically privileged women. Political intersectionality, on the other hand, emphasizes the potentially conflicting goals and needs of one’s respective identity groups. Crenshaw illustrates through her example of Black women who are split between social action agendas based on gender and on race, where neither alone sufficiently addresses the precise concerns of Black women (Shields, 2008).

Bhatia (2007) presented another perspective on how multiple minority statuses can be understood and experienced: through the concept of hybridity. This perspective views emergent identities, or identities that do not act discretely and independent of one another, but instead, relationally interact, as a unique hybrid creation. The idea of emergent or interacting identities

originated from postcolonial studies, which illustrated the impact of colonizing influences on indigenous cultures. Hybridity asserts that whenever cultures make contact, new cultural forms are born. When this concept is applied to intersectionality, it tells us that the dominant cultures can impact one's minority group identity and one's individual expression of these new intersections of minority experiences. The concept of hybridity indicates that there is stability in the intersectional identity.

Stewart and McDermott (2004) identified three aspects of intersectionality research that are crucial to the consideration of gender studies in psychology, "the nohomogeneity of groups, the location of persons within power structures and acknowledgement of the relations between those structures, and the unique effects of identifying within more than one group" (p. 519). The considerations of these aspects of intersectionality are important to use as a framework in working with populations that represent several minority identity statuses, such as transgender women of color do.

While earlier work on intersectionality focused primarily on race and gender based on sex assigned at birth, research eventually moved to consider the intersectionality of non-heteronormative groups. Parent, DeBlaere, and Moradi (2013) considered the approaches of intersectionality research on gender issues. In their study of intersectionality on gender, LGBT, and racial identities, Parent, DeBlaere, and Moradi (2013) found that a majority of research follows a dominant versus subordinate, or majority versus non-majority, framework, similar to racial identity models. The study showed that sexual orientation and gender identity were commonly coded dichotomously in heterosexual and non-heterosexual groups (Parent, DeBlaere, & Moradi, 2013). This is problematic as we know there are many dimensions to sexuality and

gender rather than just heterosexual or non-heterosexual and that gender and sexual orientation identity are not one in the same.

Many challenges remain in the translation of intersectionality frameworks to research. Overall, the treatment of LGBT identities and the treatment of racial minority across studies reflect a focus on majority versus minority status. However, when approaching marginalized communities, it is imperative to utilize a framework of intersectionality to consider the unique experiences that is borne of the combination of minority identities.

### **LGBT Identity Development**

While ample research and models exists for lifespan developmental identity models and racial, ethnic and cultural identity models, what's lacking are identity models and theories of development for transgender population. When considering the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) community at large, a disproportionate amount of the literature focuses on the LGB identities. This is significant as sexual orientation identity is defined as one's identification or dis-identification with a sexual orientation (who one is romantically or sexually attracted to), while transgender identity is defined as a gender identity that is different from sex assigned at birth. Although there is a move to present more inclusive literature, there appears to be many limitations in the current literature. For example, "LGBT identities" have recently been given its focus and attention in the U.S. While this inclusion is an expansion and progress from simply viewing an individual as heterosexual or non-heterosexual (or sexual minority vs. non-sexual minority), the literature tends to lump all identities of this acronym into one representation. The acronym seems to assume the mutual exclusivity of being lesbian (L) and gay (G) by gender, not considering that fact that those who identify as transgender (T) can still identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or more. There is also far more

research related to gay men and lesbian women, and less studies conducted for the transgender community or consider the experience of transgender persons.

Theories on sexual orientation identity development have predominantly focused on gay, lesbian, or bisexual identities (LGB). These models are viewed from a similar dominant to subordinate group system as seen in racial identity models, where one's social, sexual, and gender identities are understood and contextualized through a societal system of heterosexism and homophobia (Patton et al., 2016). In one of the most widely cited models of sexual orientation identity development, Vivienne Cass's (1979) theory of gay and lesbian identity formation (1979), a linear psychosocial model, was developed based upon data collected from gay men. This model included six stages of sexual orientation identity development: identity confusion, a stage marked by a sense of personal alienation, where one becomes aware of same-sex feelings or behaviors; identity comparison, which is described as the rationalization or bargaining stage where one compares their identity to those around them; identity tolerance, is a stage marked by the realization of homosexual self-identity; identity acceptance, is a continuation from the previous phase as the individual continues to explore their identity and LGB community, identity pride, is similar to racial identity model phases where the individual rejects and feels anger towards the majority heterosexual culture; and identity synthesis, where the individual reconciles the anger towards the heterosexual group and finds meaningful relationships within both groups. Another model presented by D'Augelli (1994) presents a sexual orientation identity development model for LGB persons that occurs across the lifespan. The model includes six non-linear processes: Exiting a heterosexual identity; Developing a personal lesbian, gay, or bisexual social identity; Developing a lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity status; Claiming identity as an LGB offspring; Developing an LGB intimacy status; and entering

an LGB community. While this model is not as rigid as Cass's linear model, its model's perspective primarily focuses on the sexual orientation aspect of LGB identities, failing to consider gender identity or expression.

It is clear that these LGBT identity models addresses only the sexual orientation identity development of LGB populations, and does not begin to consider the transgender person's experience. Furthermore, there lacks in these models a consideration for an LGBT person's gender identity.

### **Gender Identity Models**

Gender identity development theories are also viewed through the dominant to subordinate framework of sexism and cissexism, the prejudice or discrimination against transgender people. The minority identity development models discussed thus far in this proposal view the individual through the navigation and reconciliation of their identity through these systems of oppression. Sexism is defined as non-male identified individuals encounter prejudice and barriers in a patriarchal society, and cissexism is encountered by trans, genderqueer, nonbinary, and gender nonconforming individuals (Chih-Rou Huang, 2007).

Kohlberg's Cognitive Developmental Theory (1966) is one of the initial theories that discussed gender identity. The basic principle of the theory is that a child's understanding of gender develops with age. Kohlberg (1966) identified 3 stages: Gender Identity, which develops at about 2 years of age, when the child recognizes the difference between male and female in themselves and others but does not recognizes constancy; Gender Stability, which occurs at age 4, where the child recognizes the gender is fixed; and Gender Constancy, which occurs between 5 and 7 years, where the child understands that cosmetic changes will not alter sex. We can see



the limitations of the Cognitive Development Theory of gender as it limits gender to a dichotomy, and does not consider variations or fluidity.

Gender schema theory was introduced by Sandra Bem (1981) and is a cognitive theory that explains how people become gendered in society. Bem (1981) discusses how sex-linked characteristics are maintained and passed to other members of a culture. In gender schema theory, gender-linked information is said to be transmuted through society through schemata, the networks of information that allow for some information to be more easily processed and coded than others (Bem, 1981). Core gender identity is thought to be the result of ‘sex-typing’ that an individual undergoes. ‘Sex-typing’ is the information that a child receives from the world around them - through parental views, media, school, and other forms of cultural transmission. Bem (1981) proposes 4 categories: sex-typed, where the individual integrates information ‘in-line’ with their gender; cross-sex-typed, where the individual integrates information of the opposite gender; androgynous, where the individual integrates information from both genders; and undifferentiated, where the individual has not successfully integrated information regarding their gender (Bem, 1981). The limitations in Bem’s (1981) theory are similar to that of Kohlberg’s (1966), as gender is viewed as something that is fixed and rigid, and constrains people to a binary. Bem’s (1981) theory also assumes that there is information that is purely ‘male’ or ‘female,’ and does not consider the cultural impact as well as the cultural variations of gender expression.

Social learning theory has also been adapted to consider gender, and views gender identity and role as behaviors that are learned from the environment (Walter, 1968). The theory asserts that children observe those around them and pay attention to how others express gender. This information is encoded, and the child will imitate the behavior later. The child is more

likely to attend and imitate those that they perceive as similar to themselves. These behaviors are then repeated and integrated through reinforcement or punishment. Children are thus rewarded for sex-appropriate and sex-inappropriate behaviors (Walter, 1968).

Finally, the current study considered Judith Butler's (1988) theory of gender performativity as important related works for this study. Butler (1988) utilized a feminist phenomenological approach and argued that gender was to be understood as a performance in which an individual agent acts. The performative element of the theory suggests a social audience. Butler's (1988) theory is similar to social learning theory, in that it asserts that gender is essentially a performative repetition of acts associated with male or female. This theory of gender performativity is similar to the idea of "passing," where the transgender person engages in a mixture of physical gender cues (e.g., hair style, clothing) as well as certain behavioral attributes that tend to be associated with a particular gender. However, Butler's (1988) theory does not specifically address the transgender experience.

A review of these theories on gender identity leaves us wondering where transgender woman fits into the picture. These initial gender identity theories are built on the idea that gender is dichotomous, heteronormative, and unchanging - ideas that are exclusionary to the transgender population. Fortunately, in recent years, psychologists have begun to address and explore the experiences transgender identity.

### **Transgender Identity Development**

To explore the development of transgender identity development, it is important to understand how concepts such as gender identity, gender roles, and sexual orientation identities are perceived by the transgender community. Transgenderism is understood as the "breaking of gender roles and gender identity and/or going across the boundaries of gender to another gender"

(Green, 2004). This definition provided by Green is especially important as it speaks to the lived experience of the gender culture of the trans community. The common definition of the term “transgender” captures just the rudimentary meaning - wherein “transgender” refers to possessing a gender identity that differs from one’s sex assignment at birth (Chrisler & McCreary, 2010). It is important to understand the term more fully, especially through the lens of members of the group. Transgender individuals may express gender identity apart from traditional heteronormative definitions - in other words, individuals may have little to no intention of acquiring surgeries or hormone treatment as part of their transitioning (Borstein, 1994). A transgender person may choose to transition socially, legally, through hormone therapy that changes one’s secondary sexual characteristics, or surgically through gender confirmation surgery.

In considering the current research around the experiences of transgender people, it is important to recognize the emerging theoretical model of transgender theory, which is not to be confused with transgender identity theory (in which case such a theory still does not exist). Transgender theory speaks to the “fluidly embodied, socially constructed, and self-constructed aspects of social identity” (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010). Transgender theory is derived from feminist, as well as queer theories, and is influenced by feminist theory in its consideration of the intersectionality of multiple forms of oppression that influences one’s gender identity and gender expression. However, feminist theories digress on the degree to which gender should be deconstructed and some still adhere to an “essentialist, fixed binary conception of gender identity” that is ill-equipped to capture the transgender experience (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010). Transgender theory incorporates elements of queer theory - particularly in its social constructivist approach, which posits that gender identity, roles, and sexual orientation are

simply constructs defined by sociocultural conventions (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010). This concept of constructed defined by sociocultural conventions, derived from queer theory, allows gender to be understood outside of the dominant heteronormative views of sexuality and gender, and is useful in embodying the experiences of transgender people. It defies societal beliefs that gender identity, roles, and sexuality can only be understood within a heteronormative framework.

Transgender theory transcends the influence of feminist and queer theories and integrated both into a “fluid self-embodiment and a self-construction” of identity that takes into context the impact of social zeitgeists and individual lived experiences (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010). In considering gender binaries, Tauschert (2002) offered what she coined, a “fuzzy gender” approach, rather than the traditional dichotomous view, where continuity of body and mind is recognized and gender identity and expression can exist in “shades of gray” ranges of experience. Furthermore, transgender theory highlights the understanding of how “transgressing” narratives of lived experiences integrate and empower those with oppressed intersectional identities (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2012), a concept that is especially significant to the current proposed study’s focus on transgender women of color.

The intersection of sexual orientation identity and gender identity is frequently discussed in conceptualizing transgender theory, which is not as well captured in sexual orientation and gender identity theories. This is demonstrated in a study examining the interactions of gender roles, gender identity, and sexual orientation in transgender people (Nagoshi, Brzuzy, & Terrell, 2012). Nagoshi, Brzuzy, and Terrell (2012) indicated there was disparity amongst the participants’ experiences - half of the participants of the study rejected the existence of any connection between sexual orientation identity and gender identity, while the other half supported it. Rubin (2003) and Dozier (2005) revealed a relationship between the two

categories. Rubin's (2003) study on transsexual men found that for many transgender persons transitioning from female-to-male (FTM), becoming a lesbian was a part of their developmental process, though not experienced as a necessity for the gender transition. Dozier's (2005) study on sex and gender discovered that participants' sexual preferences could be based upon the "gendered meanings created in sexual and romantic interactions" and that sometimes one's sexual orientation will change based on the expressed gender identity. Results from this study indicated that individuals from the transgender community actively engaged and differentiated between gender identity, gender roles, and sexual orientation. Nagoshi, Brzuzy, and Terrell (2012) found a variety of experiences from their participants. Several participants rejected any connection between sexual orientation and gender identity, and still others had a more complex experience where they found that sexual attractions were, at times, determined by the individual's present gender identity and role. Most participants in the study also agreed that gender identity consisted of a physical basis (that gender identity congruency is affected by one's physical characteristics), and all attested to the idea that gender identity existed on a continuum and is both changeable and fluid (Nagoshi, Brzuzy, & Terrell, 2012). This study supported the theory that transgender individuals take a more nuanced and complex approach to gender identity that transcends the ideas about gender identity derived from heteronormative beliefs.

Nagoshi, Brzuzy, and Terrell (2012) utilized a social constructivist view of feminist and queer theories and uncovered several common concepts that were useful to understand in working with transgender individuals. First, participants agreed that the social and self-construction of gender roles are primarily defined by socially expressive behaviors rather than by physical characteristics. Participants' idea of gendered constructs was stereotypical of gender constructs within Western culture. Masculinity was characterized by dominance and aggression,

while femininity was characterized by nurturance, empathy, and emotion. A few participants noted that, based upon these constructs, the decision to express the female gender identity often meant a loss of social power and privilege (Nagoshi, Brzuzy, & Terrell, 2012). Additionally, gender identity was believed to be fluid, changeable, and existing on a continuum. Participants also expressed the importance of being able to “switch back-and-forth,” and move in-between the two gender worlds.

A framework that has been useful in research with the transgender community is the gender affirmation framework developed by Sevelius (2013). Sevelius (2013) defined ‘gender affirmation’ as the interpersonal process where a person receives support and social recognition for their gender expression and gender identity. The significance of gender affirmation has been noted in previous research with the transgender population. Sevelius’ (2013) study of 22 transgender women of color utilized an intersectional approach and integrated ideas from objectification theory with the Identity Model of Stigma to formulate the gender affirmation framework. Sevelius’ (2013) intersectional approach was crucial in considering the experiences of transgender women of color, as it considered the impact of the social contexts of sexism, racism, and transphobia. This consideration allowed identity to be understood within socio-political structures, such as the discrimination gender minorities face in society, and the institutional barriers they may face in different parts of the country. Sevelius’ objectification theory posits that gender socialization and sexual objectification lead to women being defined by societal expectations of their appearance; Sevelius (2013) included this theory in their understanding of transgender women of color, theorizing that the gender minority status of being a transgender woman is its own dimension to be considered. The Identity Threat Model of Stigma used in Sevelius’ (2013) study asserts that when an individual holding a ‘stigmatized

identity' is engaged in a situation that threatens their identity without means to cope with the threat, the individual will respond by endeavoring to reduce the threat or to increase their coping resources (Sevelius, 2013). The integration of these two models are meant to capture the lived experiences of transgender women of color, whose membership in several minority groups may make them susceptible to additional strain in the pursuit of identity development. The study highlighted the 'pervasive stigma' experienced by transgender women of color as they often face 'extreme marginalization' and may therefore require a higher need for gender affirmation.

In a review of current literature, Devor (2004) presented the only identity formation model for the transgender population and composed a Fourteen Stage Model of Transsexual Identity Development. Devor (2004) acknowledged the influence of homosexual identity formation models on his work, and stated that the Transsexual Identity Model is built upon Cass's Gay/Lesbian Identity model. Devor (2004) drew from his experience in the field of sociology and his work both professionally and personally with transgender populations. The fourteen stages are: 1) Abiding Anxiety, where the individual confronts the anxiety that they feel and eventually realizes that the source of the anxiety lies in gender relations; 2) Identity Confusion, where the individual realizes that they do not fit in well with others of their gender and cannot find others like themselves to mirror them; 3) Identity Comparison, is the stage where the individual are generally accepting of the fact that the physical sex of their body has so far defined their gender status, and they begin to find ways to navigate between social expectations and self-expression; 4) Discovery, describes the time period where the individual learns of transsexualism or transgenderism; 5) Identity Confusion About Transsexualism or Transgenderism, describes the stage where the individual is still wrapping their mind around the idea of transsexualism, and seeks to find out more information; 6) Identity Comparisons About

Transsexualism or Transgenderism is the stage where the individual begins to entertain the possibility of this identity, and compares oneself to one's originally assigned gender and sex, and people of the gender and sex to which one may be transitioning to; 7) Tolerance of Transsexual or Transgender Identity, is the stage where the individual comes to term with the enormity of what it means to identify as transsexed or transgendered; 8) Delay Before Acceptance of Transsexual or Transgender Identity, is the stage for many who are on their way to accepting this new identity, but enter into a period of delay as they decide whether or not this is the correct solution to their gender discomfort; 9) Acceptance of Transsexual or Transgender Identity, is the full acceptance of the individual as transsexed or transgendered; 10) Delay Before Transition, is the stage where one decides whether or not to undergo physical or social transitions; 11) Transition, is the stage that an individual embarks on the processes to transition, should they decide to make a physical or social transition; 12) Acceptance of Post-Transition Gender/Sex Identity, is the stage where feelings of gender dysphoria may be supplanted by feelings of gender euphoria over time due to transition (transition does not need to be completely accomplished for a person to reach this stage; 13) Integration, is the stage where the individual becomes integrated into society at large and becomes more able and comfortable in their new identity (this stage is usually a gradual process; 14) Pride, implies both a personal sense of pride in oneself as well as a political stance.

Although Devor's (2004) model of Transsexual Identity Development is the only current model to address transgender identity development, there are a number of concerns about the model's generalizability and applicability. Devor (2004) makes the disclosure that the model adheres to what he calls "contemporary mainstream Euro-American values." Devor's work was derived from a primarily white or Anglo-American participant pool (Devor, 1987, 1993, 1994,



1997). This model, while comprehensive, fails to include the nuances of different cultural backgrounds and its influences on development, and lacks the consideration for intersectionality in the trans community. It should also be noted that Devor's model was comprised of approximately 20 years of clinical and non-clinical experiences. While the work and data that Devor collected over two decades is certainly significant and informative, it is important to note that his last work was published nearly two decades ago. Transgender literature and transgender mental healthcare have certainly evolved and changed in recent years. For example, in the current zeitgeist, the term 'transsexual' is far less common in the transgender community and may be perceived as derogatory by some in transgender communities. as well as in the health care industry. Recent studies conducted by Nagoshi, Brzuzy, and Terrell (2012) and Koken, Bimbi, and Parsons (2009) have begun to address some of the limitations in Devor's work by considering the experiences of racial minorities. Other authors critiqued Devor's Eurocentric model for "coming out" as a uniform process, and does not consider the fluidity and complexity of many non-heterosexual, non-White, and non-Western individuals (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005).

## **Summary**

The current literature lacks an exploration of the lived experiences of transgender women of color. Existing models speak to only parts of the transgender women of color's experiences, failing to understand and capture the sum experience of all their parts. The current study aimed to begin the consideration and exploration of transgender women of color's identity development processes. With considerations from racial identity models, transgender theory, and Devor's transsexual identity model, this study elicited the shared experiences of identity development for transgender women of color.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **Methods**

#### **Rationale for a Qualitative Approach**

Psychological research is frequently critiqued for its reliance on utilizing quantitative measures to explain phenomena that are qualitative in nature (Williams & Collins, 1999). Quantitative designs allow the researcher to confirm hypotheses or existing theories using the standardization of data collection to allow statistical comparison. While qualitative designs provide a flexible framework that allow the research to elicit data that is rich and nuanced, allowing the participants' experiences to inform the research.

Qualitative research is advantageous and appropriate when seeking to explore and understand new experiences and phenomena. Willig (2001) asserted that qualitative research seeks to describe and understand the "quality and texture of experience" rather than looking to generalize to a broader population. A strength of quantitative studies is the ability to provide data that is generalizable and presents a snapshot of a population. However, qualitative studies offer the interpretation and meaning-making that the former lacks.

In considering the different aims and advantages of the two major research approaches, a qualitative method was determined to be most appropriate for the current study, given the complexity of the phenomenon, the exploratory nature of the research, and the significance of understanding the participants' processes of meaning making.

#### **Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

The current study illuminated the process and experience of identity formation for transgender women of color. Current research on transgender identity development lacks an examination of the intersection of minority identities and its impact on gender identity

development and expression. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) provides the best equipped method of exploration and discovery for delving into the developing of intersecting minority identities. The qualitative method of interpretative phenomenological analysis was selected to capture the rich and detailed description of participants' lived experience and to reveal how participants make meaning out of their experience of possessing their intersections of minority identities. This is especially significant in gathering data and understanding around the experiences of transgender women of color, as there is a limited number of studies that considers the life experiences of those holding these intersecting identities. The nature of an IPA design allows the participants to directly inform and affect the data, making the conclusions drawn from the study more valuable and authentic.

IPA has a short and long history; while the method initially made its mark in health psychology literature, recently, IPA has permeated clinical, counseling, and social psychology literature (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005). Smith and Osborn (2003) emphasized that the method is remarkably compatible with psychological inquiry as there is an emphasis on cognitive processes of individuals' experiences. IPA emphasizes phenomenological and idiographic elements and prioritizes the hermeneutics of one's experience, which are essential to understanding human psychology (Eatough & Smith, 2008; Spinelli, 1989). IPA is the most suitable approach when one wishes to explore how individuals perceive and make sense of their personal and social world; it is particularly advantageous when one is concerned with "complexity, process, or novelty" (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

### **Participants and Sampling**

This study included 5 participants, which was the recommended sample size for IPA studies (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The study utilized purposeful sampling methods to

identify individuals who meet the study's participation criteria. Participants were recruited through LGBTQ community networks in San Francisco, California. This included: St. James Infirmary, a nonprofit LGBTQ clinic, El Rio and the Stud, two historically queer and LGBTQ-friendly bars, Asia SF, an entertainment company founded by transgender women of color, and the National Center for Lesbian Rights.

Inclusion criteria for this study included racial/ethnic minority identification, identification as a transgender woman, and adults above the age of 18. Racial/ethnic minority identification included participants with racial/ethnic identities that were not a part of the majority white culture of the United States. Participants of this study all self-identified as transgender women, transgender was defined as those whose gender identity did not correspond with their sex assigned at birth; a transgender woman is a woman whose sex assigned at birth is male (World Professional Association for Transgender Health, 2012). This study recruited participants over the age of 18 so they may consent to participation, but did not select from a particular age group. This is in accordance with the IPA theory that homogeneity of group should be dependent on interpretative concerns or pragmatic considerations. A homogeneous age cohort was not necessary for the interpretative analysis of this study. The participants were recruited from the San Francisco area through communities and agencies that provided services to transgender people. Due to the greater geographical reach of social media platforms, some participants were recruited from outside of the San Francisco area. Participants were selected on a 'first come, first serve' basis upon meeting the requirements of the inclusion criteria. Surplus participants were notified that the study had met its sample capacity and that their interest and commitment was appreciated.

Purposeful sampling methods were utilized for this study for the identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest. The recruitment of participants was guided by Smith et al. (1999) who suggested a sample size of five to six participants to maintain an “idiographic focus with sufficient depth.” A small sample size sets the stage for an idiographic concentration that allows the researcher to gain insight into the “subjective and interpersonal involvement of human emotion and experience” (Eatough & Smith, 2008).

### **Data Sources**

**Brief interview form (Appendix C).** This form is a brief survey that potential participants completed before being invited for a full interview. The form included basic demographic information such as age, race, gender identity, etc. The form was completed in-person or over the phone and took approximately 5-10 minutes.

**Interview schedule (Appendix D).** The interview schedule is the list of questions participants were asked during the full interview. The interview was developed based on the guidelines offered by Smith et al. (2009) and was informed by the racial/ethnic identity models and the transgender identity model discussed in Chapter 2 of this proposal.

### **Memos**

Memos were created during the first phase of analysis, and were the investigator’s initial ideas and interpretations that were bracketed for later reflection. Memos are of a rudimentary nature but significant in the formulation of emergent themes. Memos can be utilized in IPA studies as a means of tracking emerging ideas for later consolidation into more concrete themes (Berks, Chapman, & Francis, 2008).

## Procedures

**Recruitment.** Recruitment flyers (Appendix B) were distributed to the following agencies and organizations: Oakland LGBTQ Center, San Francisco Community Health Center, Transgender SF, and the Center for Excellence for Transgender Health at UCSF. Prospective participants were contacted through phone or email to notify the researcher of their interest in the study. Prospective participants were requested to complete a short screening interview (Appendix C), and if the prospective participant met the inclusion criteria for the study, an invitation was extended for a full interview. Participants were also asked to sign an informed consent form before participation.

**Interviews.** Once scheduled, each participant was engaged in a 60-minute, semi-structured interview at an agreed upon location convenient to the participant. IPA researchers commonly used this method as it provided a degree of flexibility that allowed each participant the freedom to explore and discuss ideas, themes, and experiences they found related to the development of their identity. Once seated, this researcher reviewed the consent form (Appendix C) with the participant, and upon receiving consent, this researcher began audio recording.

An interview schedule (Appendix D) guided the interview and was mildly adapted as needed with each participant's unique responses. The questions on the schedule were developed based on the guidelines offered by Smith et al. (2009), who proposed beginning with broad prompts related to the topic, followed by specific questions and optional prompts. This method allowed for the surfacing of novel areas unplanned by the interview schedule, and these areas were then included in the analysis.

At the end of the interview, participants were given a list of mental health resources in the area if the participant wished to explore a disclosed topic or event further with a licensed clinician.

**Memos.** Qualitative research aims to explore a given phenomenon, and memos are a tool that enables researchers to extract meaning out of data and express it in conceptual terms (Berks, Chapman, & Francis, 2008). Memos are the vehicles that transport the researcher from the concrete to the conceptual. During step one of the analysis, which is detailed later in this chapter, the researcher recorded informal memos of any initial interpretations that came to mind related to the interpersonal process of the interview. Memos answered the question, “what is happening in the data?” This can look like definitional statements to summarize what the data is stating. Memos were also used to map the ‘decision-making trail,’ as it allowed the researcher to record the natural progression of the study.

### **Qualitative Data Analysis Software**

All interviews were voice-recorded with the consent of the participants and transcribed verbatim. A transcription service was used, and participants’ confidentiality was protected through the de-identification of distinguishing information. Transcribed interviews were entered into the Atlas.TI program (Atlas.TI Scientific Software Development GmbH, Version 8.1) for analysis. Atlas.TI is an electronic program that provides tools which allows researchers to uncover and systematically organize and analyze data. The program is widely used by researchers publishing in leading journals (Kluber, 2014), and served to aid in the process of coding and annotating information gathered from interviews. The program offers flexible interface to visually manage different types of data. For this study, the program was used to directly import interview transcriptions. The coding technology in the program allowed

researchers to explore their material in great depth, and facilitated the various steps in the analysis, such as the ability to integrate and record memos.

### **Interpretative Data Analysis Process**

This study followed the data analysis procedures outlined by Smith et al. (2009). The process of IPA data analysis can be characterized by a set of common processes and principles, focusing on moving from the particular to the shared and from the descriptive to the interpretative. The task of the researcher was to deeply engage with each interview transcript that eventually yielded a thematic structure that represented the experiential elements shared by the participants.

**Step 1: Reading and re-reading the first transcript.** The researcher began with close readings of the interview, paying attention to the original words of the participant. Smith et al. (2009) recommends that the IPA researcher “slow down the habitual propensity for quick and dirty reduction and synopsis.” To begin the process of fully entering into the participant’s world, the researcher must identify and bracket any initial interpretations and ideas based on his or her personal biases and assumptions (Smith, 2010). These ideas and interpretations can be bracketed into memos, and recorded for later reflection; repeated reading is encouraged during this first step.

**Step 2: Initial noting.** This initial level of analysis is the most detailed and time consuming, as this step requires the examination of semantic content and language use on a deeply exploratory level (Smith et al., 2009). This step is similar to the coding stage common in most qualitative studies and is more detailed than the memo-ing that occurs in Step 1. Initial observations were noted line-by-line and the observations took the form of descriptive comments, which focused on the content of the statements; linguistic comments, which attended



to the participants' use of language (e.g., pronoun use, metaphors, shifts in tense, pauses, hesitations, tones); and conceptual comments, which were the researcher's initial interpretative ideas, posed in questions for later consideration (Smith, 2010). Some comments associated with personal reflexivity may also be recorded (e.g., how might the personal characteristics of the researcher affect rapport with participants). This step is an exploratory stage of analysis and the researcher noted anything of interest.

**Step 3: Developing emergent themes.** This step is the transition from the concrete data to the interpretation to more abstract ideas. At this stage, the researcher works more with the notes developed above in Steps 1 and 2 than with the transcript (Smith, 2010). The researcher reviewed the notations to develop a sense of the overall context of the participant's reports. It was the task of the researcher to reduce the volume of detail (from the transcript and initial notes) while maintaining the complexity and depth of the data. The researcher will develop labels that characterize significant portions of the data. While the researcher formulated a concise phase at a slightly higher level of abstraction, it was still grounded in the detail of participants' account (Smith, 2010). These conceptual labels, derived from the original words of the transcript, were then extracted and listed chronologically with line numbers that pointed to the evidence associated with each theme.

**Step 4: Searching for connections across emergent themes.** This step involved the examination of the set of emergent themes for the participant. The researcher identified interconnections between ideas synthesized from the data and clustered the themes that were theoretically related to one another. In practice, it means compiling themes for the whole transcript before looking for connections and clusters (Smith, 2010). Data reduction strategies described by Smith et al. (2009) were employed. These included a process of abstraction, which

is a basic form of identifying patterns between emergent themes to develop what's called a 'super-ordinate' theme; and subsumption, which describes when one emergent theme acquires a super-ordinate status and brings together a series of related themes. Atlas.TI was used to keep track of a list of major themes and subthemes.

**Step 5: Moving to the next case.** The process described above was repeated with each transcript. With the analysis of each transcript, the researcher continued to bracket the themes and conceptualizations from prior analyses, while allowing new ideas to materialize from each succeeding transcript. Therefore, themes from previous transcripts continued to be considered and compared with following transcripts.

**Step 6: Looking for patterns across cases.** This process called for the formation of new super-ordinate themes once each transcript was analyzed separately. The task of the researcher was to identify patterns across all the transcripts, reconfiguring some themes and creating new ones that reflected higher order concepts of the initial themes. Some themes that were notable but determined to be less relevant to the research question were omitted from the final analysis. This was the most interpretative, creative, and challenging phase of the analysis, as it called on the researcher to make sense of the phenomenon while maintaining the integrity of the participants' original accounts.

### **Feasibility and Dissemination Plan**

This study was feasible in the proposed timeline provided in Appendix F. Given this timeline, the researcher had access to the participants as data was collected well before the start of Doctoral Internship. The dissemination plan of this study was to provide summary briefings to the agencies where the participants were recruited from. This ensured that the population that this study aimed to serve had access to the information and conclusions drawn from this study.

**Positionality and Reflexivity Statement**

Reflexivity is the concept which the researcher is conscious of the biases, values, and experiences they bring to a qualitative research study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Positionality is the practice of the researcher describing their own position in relation to the study, with consideration of how this may influence aspects of the study, such as the way data is collected or interpreted (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

I am the sole researcher of this study and I identify as a cisgender, immigrant Asian woman of color residing in the Bay Area, California. I am college educated, from a lower middle class environment, and additionally identify within the LGBTQIA community. For the past few years, I have worked in various mental health and academic settings throughout the Bay Area. My experiences have allowed me to interact with and support LGBTQIA communities, specifically the transgender and gender non-binary communities in the Bay Area.

This project is significant due to the current limitations in the research at considering the lived experiences of transgender women of color. To that end, my identity as a LGBTQIA woman of color is a commonality that I share with my participants, which I believe allowed them to respond to questions authentically and comfortably. My cisgender identity is a particular area where I hold differences and privileges that my participants do not share, which has the possibility to impact participants' responses. Additionally, my connection and relationship with some of the local community spaces for transgender women and LGBTQIA people may have positively impacted participants' level of comfort and trust in the study.

## CHAPTER IV

### Results

#### Participants

Participants of this study were five transgender women of color. Four of the five transgender women identified as Asian and one participant identified as African American. All participants were between the ages of 29-38. All participants began their transition process over two years ago. All participants were recruited through flyers posted on social media. Of the five participants, one participant grew up outside of the United States.

Three of the five subjects who participated in the semi-structured interview were interviewed via VSee, a HIPPA-compliant video conferencing platform. The remaining two participants were interviewed in-person. Each participant has been assigned a pseudonym to protect their privacy. A detailed demographic description of each participant is provided below in Table 1.

**Table 1.**

*Participants Demographics and Designated Pseudonyms*

Pseudonym	Age	Gender Identity	Pronouns	Racial-cultural identity	Geographical location
Jess	29	MTF Trans woman	She/Her/Hers	Asian, Taiwanese-American	Los Angeles, CA
Karine	38	Trans woman	She/Her/Hers	African American/Black	Hartford, CT
Yumi	37	Trans woman, multiple person	She/Her/Hers They/Them	Half Japanese, half Chinese	Berkeley, CA
Trish	32	Woman, Trans woman	She/Her/Hers	Filipina	Born in the Philippines, Currently resides in San Francisco, CA
Ayla	29	Trans woman	She/Her/Hers	Chinese American	San Francisco, CA

## Emergent Themes

The purpose of this research study was to investigate the experience of identity development for transgender women of color. The analysis yielded six superordinate themes and ten subthemes. These emergent themes are presented in Table 2 and described below. Many of the themes took variant forms between participants' accounts.

**Table 2.**

### *Structure of Emergent Themes*

Superordinate themes and subthemes	# of Participants endorsing themes
Life Course Milestones	5
Early Experiences and Environmental Factors	5
Transitioning	5
After Transitioning	5
Dating	5
Influence of family, race, and culture	5
Family impact on racial-cultural experiences	5
Racial-cultural impact on transitioning	5
Experience with majority norms while holding minority identities	5
Whiteness	4
Binary gender system	3
Lack of visibility and representation	4
Discrimination	5
Environmental safety	5
Responses to discrimination	5
Community Support	5

**Life course milestones.** All participants discussed their lived experiences as transgender women of color by reflecting on significant milestones that occurred at various stages of their life, beginning as early as childhood. The subthemes that emerged from participants' reflection of these milestones are early experiences and environmental factors, transitioning, after transitioning, and dating.

**Early experiences and environmental factors.** All participants reflected on experiences in their early childhood when considering their identity development as transgender women.

Participants described the different ways they would explore gender, particularly with dress and play.

Participants described the early signs and cues in their experiences that indicated some gender discrepancy. Participants recalled feeling different than their peers, and a desire and affinity for dress and expression that was not congruent with “being a boy.” Participant Jess reflected,

Growing up, I always felt like I was a bit different. It wasn’t until a lot later that I figured it out. My first memory is probably in fourth grade, something like that. Third grade, second grade maybe? Of just being really into this boy in my class. So then, growing up, I’d say, “Ok well I think I’m just gay.” But that never felt right.

Other participants reported similar experiences in their early childhood. For example, Participant Karine additionally shared, “When I was little, when I’d go to bed, when I would dream about myself, I was a girl in every dream.”

All participants considered the importance of their environmental factors when first beginning to explore their gender identity and gender expression. Some participants experienced a supportive and safe environment, while others observed the impact of “sheltered” and “conservative” environments. Participant Jess explained, “I didn’t really have much of an opportunity to explore all of this, because I grew up in a pretty sheltered environment.” Participant Ayla noted that she grew up in a “diverse” and “progressive” elementary school system, and this for a while had afforded her freedom in experimenting with common gender norms and boundaries. She observed,

It was kind of, I don’t want to say like a gender-neutral environment, because that wasn’t even a thing back then, but it kind of was in a lot of ways you know? The boys and girls

did everything together, and not learning all those kind of hard boundaries that society and the world make very obvious for you... it was a lot of stress then to suddenly be forced into a box that I wasn't even aware existed until I was 12 or 13 years old.

Two of the five participants discussed the dangers of exploring gender in environments.

Participant Ayla described the experiences of being bullied and called “faggot” due to her gender expression, and Participant Karine explained how she had put her gender exploration on pause due to the need to survive. And finally, Participant Trish, who was born in the Philippines and began her transitioning there as a child, described some gender discrepancy early in life but otherwise experienced a very accepting and supportive environment where she was free to explore and express herself.

***Transitioning.*** Four of the participants had begun their transition in early adulthood. Participant Trish had begun her transitioning with hormone therapy at age 12 in the Philippines, with the support of her grandfather. It is interesting to note that of the participants, the four U.S.-born women experienced and perceived more barriers and discrimination and transitioned after adolescence, while the one non-U.S. born participant perceived less internal and external conflicts, and transitioned in early adolescence.

Some of the participants reflect on important milestones in their transition, such as physical changes or social or legal recognition. Participant Jess shared a recent and important milestone for her:

During the time that I got my boobs, I also changed my hairstyle, and I have to tell you that getting boobs and doing your hair are two huge markers for people. My life has so dramatically changed since then. Lately, I feel better about my body, I feel more comfortable being naked in front of someone else.

Participant Jess shared that she took it step by step, focusing on each milestone or marker at a time. Participant Karine described a similar experience, and the significance of the concrete markers, such as changing her legal name and having it reflected on her driver's license, had on her transition. All participants discussed the significance of being socially accepted as their authentic gender. Some participants reflected that through transitioning, it feels as if they are going through a "second puberty." Participant Jess stated that she is, "basically going through puberty nowadays", and compared her transition timeline to that of a "cisgender timeline"—when comparing herself, she noted that she often feels she is 12-15 years behind her cis-peers, but that she is very happy she's "in the game." Participant Karine similarly shared,

All the wild, fun stuff that you normally associated with being a teenager and having that group of friends, I have now. In a sense, I have a bunch of 16-year-olds piled up in a car, and we didn't get that til our 40s. It's kind of true what they say about second puberty.

Additionally, the phenomenon of passing was a crucial part of participants' experience of transitioning. All the participants shared their desire to pass and satisfaction with passing.

Passing is the ability to be perceived as the gender one identifies as; in some contexts, passing can also refer to one's ability to not be recognized as transgender. The majority of participants experienced their ability to pass with a sense of happiness and pride, with some describing the experience as a significant milestone to their transition. Participant Yumi shared:

All I had to do was to wear the female business casual outfits and that was it. I didn't need to do anything else to be seen and identified as a trans woman. At my current job, the dress code is very gender neutral. It's a lot more challenging to find clothes that fit my gender expression in a way that feels good to me, and also be read appropriately by customers.



Two participants named that passing was a way to “blend in” and not be discriminated against. Participant Ayla shared that she has always aspired to “blend in and not publicly out” herself, and Participant Trish discussed her relief that she can pass, and fear of being discriminated should she be recognized or read as transgender.

***After transitioning.*** All participants additionally discussed their lived experiences since they have transitioned. While all participants have transitioned from male to female, some participants still consider themselves to be transitioning in an ongoing manner. Many participants describe a paradigm shift, where they reflect on earlier experiences of discomfort and conflict. All the participants reported varying degrees of satisfaction at having transitioned. Participant Jess described,

So you start doing this retrospect thing, and I really started to find that this one new paradigm shift in how I thought about myself, just explained so much about my past. Many participants additionally reported feelings of happiness. Participant Yumi shared,

Being a woman made me infinitely happier, and I always knew that would be true. I can look back and there are so many instances in my life where I had that thought or sense.

Participant Karine reflected her sense of meaning and fulfillment in the same vein:

It was as if I didn’t have a foot in each universe anymore. I’m a runner and a triathlete. And doing the race as my authentic self, it adds more to it. A race means more, because I fight harder, because I realize I’m really representing myself now out here. Now when I see my name in the byline, it means more.

***Dating.*** Finally, a majority of the participants discussed the impact and significance of love and dating on their transitioning. Some participants reflected that dating and love had been an important motivation for transitioning, as they wanted to date as their authentic gender

identity. Some participants also observed that their sexual attractions also influenced their early understandings of their gender identity. Participant Jess shared about her feelings on love and dating:

The greater motivation for transitioning has always been love. And love has always been a marker in my life. After growing up and thinking that I was gay because I was into men, and then realizing that I was trans and that was why I was only into STRAIGHT men... I realized that I wanted to be loved as a woman.

Participant Ayla also experienced uncertainty early on, stating that there was a period where she could not decide to come out as a “fairly feminine gay male” or a “transgender woman”.

Participant Karine expressed not wanting to date while being perceived as a man, and Participant Trish shared that while she is accepting of her husband’s cross-dressing, she does not want him to become transgender as she wants to be the woman in the relationship.

And finally, participants also experience challenges with dating both before and after transitioning. Participants shared that their dating life was mostly “non-existent” before transitioning, with Participant Karine reflecting on how uncomfortable the very few dating experiences she had were when she still identified as a boy. Participant Jess discussed the impact of stigma and discrimination on her dating experiences. She shared that because she is attracted to cisgender heterosexual men, she often had to consider and navigate the varying degrees of social stigma expressed by both the men she dates or those around them. She explained:

There’s obviously some real stigma in being a trans woman, but there’s also a decent amount of stigma in being transamorous. This author, he wanted to make a term that

gave the identity a positive association. Before then, the idea is that if you have a string of trans lovers, you're a fetishizer or trans chaser. It's all derogatory.

Participant Jess shared that although she's had more and more success with dating since transitioning, she still has extra layers to consider when dating as a transgender woman. She reflected:

Some of them prefer not to go out with me in public, or go to social events as my date. Some of them will hold my hand while we're walking in public, and it's totally fine. I really try to understand where they are and how much experience they've had dating trans women, or whether I'm their first trans.

Participant Yumi shared in her experience, dating while being transgender is difficult, particularly on dating apps, but that she has found kink spaces and sex positive communities that are very open. Four out of the five participants discussed the importance of their dating and romantic relationships to their life and transitioning experiences. The one participant stated simply that she is not dating.

**Influence of family, race, and culture.** In considering racial and cultural identity, all participants acknowledge the influence of their family relationships. As seen in previous studies, participants experienced their racial identity and cultural identity interchangeably, and makes no distinction between the two.

***Family impact on racial-cultural experiences.*** A majority of the participants attribute their racial-cultural identity and experiences to their relationships with their family system. Based on these early experiences with family, participants to varying degrees either sustains or disengages from their racial-cultural communities. Three of the Asian-identified, U.S. born

participants reflected that their lack of connection to their racial-cultural identity is due to cultural values not being “passed down” by the older generations. Participant Yumi stated:

I learned very little about my Chinese heritage. My mom, her dad was in the Air Force, so she lived all over the world. We as her children benefits from that worldly experience, but in exchange we didn’t have a strong tie to the cultural identity of being Chinese.”

The other two participants who experienced support and acceptance from their families, reported more positive connections and pride of their racial-cultural identities. Participant Karine transitioned in early adulthood with the support of her father and maintained a significant relationship with Black communities; Participant Trish transitioned in childhood with the support of her grandfather, and continues to maintain strong connections to the Filipino community.

***Racial-cultural impact on transitioning.*** Four of the participants experienced a conflict between the beliefs and values of their racial-cultural community, and their desire to transition. Two Asian-identified participants describe the pressure of cultural values and gender expectations put on them by the family, and the guilt of being different and rejecting these roles. Participant Karine observed similar cultural views in the Black community that conflicted with her gender experience:

There’s this idea within the Black community that this trans, this is a White people’s thing. That’s one of the biggest hurdles that you kind of get through in dealing with. Unfortunately, a lot of the violence against the Black trans community is done to us by me and mine. It’s hard to say it’s White people’s shit. We often times have to break a lot of barriers just to work within our own people.

Again, the U.S. born Asian-identified participants reported similar conflicts that led to a disconnection from their racial-cultural communities. Participant Jess reported feelings of shame

and guilt, and shared, “The reason why I’m not so culturally focused is because I was always afraid of my family knowing I’m trans and not accepting it.” These participants reflected that although race and culture informed parts of their lived experiences, they do not feel a strong affinity towards this part of their identity, and this may be due in part of the racial-cultural community’s lack of acceptance of transgenders. For example, Participant Trish, who began her transition in the Philippines, reported a different experience. She shared that because there is a large community of transgender women in the Philippines, her identity is culturally accepted and congruent; because of the support and acceptance she’s received, she continues to feel very connected to her Filipino communities in both countries.

**Experiences with majority norms while holding minority identities.** All participants examined their relationship to majority culture and its norms and values when discussing their experiences as transgender women of color. The main majority norms that participants discussed were whiteness, cisgender heteronormative views, and the gender binary system.

**Whiteness.** A majority of the participants observe the privilege and power in being racially White when transitioning. Participant Karine explains that while there is diversity in the transgender community, “most of everything you see of being trans comes through a very White lens.” Participant Karine shares that in some communities, there is the belief that ‘trans’ is just for white people. Most participants share the experience that their racial-cultural minority identities have made it more difficult to transition. Participant Ayla stated, “If you’re not white then there are usually a lot of extra barriers. To transitioning especially.” A majority of the participants expressed negative feelings with Whiteness and White privilege.

Additionally, some participants discuss their proximity and attraction to Whiteness. Some participants noted that much of their social networks consists of White people; one

participant noted that this may be due to her attraction to Whiteness, both culturally and interpersonally, while other participants alluded to the lack of diversity in their environments. Participant Karine recalled that she was the only Black person in her first transgender support group, and she gained some very affirming White-identified friends and mentors through this network. Participant Jess observed that her attraction to Whiteness may be due in part to her racial-cultural experiences growing up, and the idealization of Whiteness she experienced. And finally, Participant Trish reported feelings of wanting her skin to be more white.

***Gender binary system.*** Some participants discussed the challenges of navigating their experiences within a binary view of gender and the expected norms and roles that came with this system. These participants reported a felt pressure of having to conform to stereotypical expectations of masculinity versus femininity. Participant Ayla stated:

[...] these strange expectations? Or, oh you're a man now or whatever, and it's like, oh I never thought about this as a kid before. [...] Suddenly I'm thrust into a world where there are those kind of rules, and it's like, oh I very much do not fit in with all these other boys that grew up in a more traditional environment. All of the sex segregation things, all of the rigid gender roles stuff.

Participant Ayla explained that when confronted with the gender binary, it became clear to her that the normative view of masculinity and maleness did not make sense to her, and that her internal experiences were more aligned with girls and femininity, although this was also not a perfect fit. Participant Ayla goes on to wonder if she would have transitioned at all if not for these rigid gender norms and roles. Similarly, Participant Karine also reported a felt pressure to observe the gender binary system throughout her transition. She reflected:

In our society, we gender the oddest things. One of the oddest things we gender is the concept of independence, autonomy, and agency within a relationship. Why are we gendering caressing? Why are we gendering caring? When I was perceived to be male, why was my role supposed to be to do it and not feel anything? Still there are days where I feel I'm not feminine enough. I'm not woman enough.

And finally, Participant Jess shared that when it came to navigating society's view of gender, she will sometimes "leave it up to them" for fear of discrimination or additional obstacles to her everyday life.

**Lack of visibility and representation.** A majority of participants reflected on the impact of not having transgender visibility and representation in the world around them. These participants all began transitioning in the U.S. and discussed how the lack of visibility delayed or negatively impacted their transition. Participant Yumi reflected regarding her early gender discrepancies,

There was never the sense back then that I could do anything about it, that it was an option; because that's not a thing we have, there's no option. Even when I knew that queerness was an option back in high school, that was only limited to interpersonal relationships and attraction to people. I was in high school in the 90s, we just didn't know.

Participant Ayla reflected a similar experience, noting that there "was not a lot of visibility, representation, or acceptance" when she was growing up; she stated that the "whole concept of transgender" was not available to her. Other participants reflected similar experiences in their early life, with Participant Karine "blocking" and repressing her gender conflicts as she

navigated racial discrimination, and Participant Jess attempting to fit her gender conflict within other more visible societal interpretations, and that her discomfort was just because she was gay.

Three of the five participants reflected that once they were introduced to the concept of transgender, once there was language and accessibility for their experiences, there was more understanding and less internal conflict. Participant Jess reflected:

Once the language came, and I knew what trans woman was, it was immediately like things fell into place. I would say the language aspect of it was so important for me.

Participant Karine similarly attributed that language gave her understanding and insight. She additionally recognized the impact of her own privilege due to her access to education, sharing that this privilege and access gave her accessibility to a number of other things that made the transitioning process easier.

Participant Trish, who transitioned during early adolescence while living in the Philippines, reported more community support and acceptance, noting that there is a term in Filipino culture called “bayot,” and although she doesn’t identify as such, this term meant that community had an understanding and acceptance of non-heterosexual and non-cisgender identities.

**Discrimination.** All participants experienced discrimination and rejection based on their identities. It is important to note that this superordinate theme in particular is pervasive and can be seen in many of the other themes. Participants experienced various kinds of discrimination throughout the different life course milestones, with their racial-cultural communities, and in response to majority culture. Participant Trish shared her fears of being discriminated against at her place of work and expressed relief and a sense of safety in her ability to ‘pass’, the ability to



be perceived as the gender one self-identifies as and to not be perceived as transgender. She stated:

I think I'm in a field... I just think, patients, with me touching them, I don't want them to be uncomfortable or cause an issue for me. I'm not willing to risk that. Right now, I have a lot of patients, especially men.

Participant Jess discussed a similar fear when dating. She stated, "I see all these white men and I'm like, ok I'm still attracted to you, but which one of you guys are Nazis?".

Additionally, one participant described a fear of gatekeeping based on discrimination. Participant Karine reflected her anxiety and dread at the DMV, when there initially seemed to be a problem with her changing her name and gender. If the DMV worker had not approved her paperwork, it would have significantly impacted her transitioning.

***Environmental safety.*** Participants report experiencing discrimination for both their racial-cultural identities as well as their gender identities. When reflecting on these experiences, all participants acknowledge the impact of their geographical location - some observe that in more racially diverse and politically liberal areas, they receive less overt forms of discrimination, and some observe that in more racially White and "conservative" areas, they receive more overt discrimination. This attention to environmental factors and its implication on personal safety is also seen in participants' reflection of their early experiences.

Participant Yumi reflected that by residing in the San Francisco Bay Area she does not experience as much discrimination based on her race; however, she still occasionally encounters when strangers will yell at her, "go back where you came from" with racially obscene gestures. Participant Karine discussed that throughout her early life, she would "block" out feelings of

gender discrepancies due to needing to “survive” her environment, a mostly Black neighborhood in a fairly White state.

Four of the five participants identify as Asian and have lived in the San Francisco Bay Area at some point in their lives. One participant identified as Black and lives in Connecticut. All participants weave in the factor of geography and racial identity when discussing discrimination, with the Black-identified participant reporting the most experiences of discrimination.

***Responses to discrimination.*** The majority of participants experienced varying degrees of discrimination all throughout their life, both before and since transitioning their genders. Participant Trish began experiencing discrimination after she moved to the U.S.

Participants report a general feeling of lack of belonging. The felt discrimination seem to be due in part to their non-conformity with majority norms, as well as their statuses as both racial-cultural and gender minorities. One participant identified the impact of the majority culture that is cisgender heteronormativity (cishet), which is the assumption that cisgender identities and heterosexual identities are what is normative and therefore ‘others’ non-cishet identities such as transgender. Other participants describe in varying degrees their experiences of being left out or ‘othered’ due to their transgender identity without naming the cisgender heteronormative social norm.

Four of the participants describe a feeling of lack of belonging in their life due to different degrees of discrimination. Participant Jess shared her experiences of being stared at by non-transgender people in public who were trying to “suss out” who she is and if she is transgender by “trying to get gender markers from me.” Participant Yumi also shared,

It's fairly rare that I feel a sense of belonging. We have a lot of confidence, but we just feel so different from our co-workers.

Participant Ayla additionally stated,

It's been challenging to fit in along any of the category lines, I guess. It is lonely at times. It's not really having a place that you feel like you belong specifically in the world.

Participants respond to the felt discrimination and the feelings of lack of belonging in different ways: assimilation or code-switching. Three of the four Asian-identified participants described varying degrees of desire to assimilate into the majority culture. For example, Participant Jess stated, "My goals with transitioning, though there have been several, is that I just want to assimilate with White, cishet (cisgender heteronormative) culture." Both Participant Jess, who is Asian-identified, and Participant Karine, who is Black-identified, discussed their views that the concept of assimilation is a majority value. Participant Jess reflected,

Growing up as an American child in a Taiwanese family, it was almost like... for some reason, this American culture really wants you to assimilate and forget about your cultural past. And I think I bought into that. I just felt like it was cooler to be an American. [...] I always bought into this white, cishet normative story, that's always idealized, or it has been historically... I'm disappointed that I'm really assimilistic.

Participant Karine also observed that assimilation is a "very White value". She shared that instead of assimilating, she would code-switch in response to discrimination and the majority culture. Code-switching is defined as the practice of moving back-and-forth between two languages or dialects, and Participant Karine discussed code-switching in reference to her racial-cultural experiences. She explained:

I grew up in the most African American area of a largely White state. Because of school segregation, my kindergarten was the first one to be fully integrated. I had to learn to function in two different worlds. I had to learn how to function in a very White world. I became fluent in code-switching.

It is interesting to note the differences in responses to discrimination and lack of belonging between the participants; Participant Karine, the only Black-identified participant, did not endorse a desire to assimilate but instead discusses her *need* to code-switch. Participant Karine described the dangers she faced as a “young Black boy” and the need to survive and find safety. She stated,

So much of life for me has been preoccupied with surviving and getting along, and just finding the next step forward.

This directly impacted her transitioning, as she reflected she “blocked out” her gender conflict until she found safety in her environment.

**Community support.** Four of the participants discuss the importance of having community support, particularly due to feelings of lack of belonging. Some participants discuss the significance of having a transgender community for support. For example, Participant Karine shared:

When we go out, we go out as a group. Here’s these four black transgender women walking into the venue... my friends were going and said, “look if you get yourself here, we’ll spring for the hotel room. We just want you there, we just want you there because it could give you an opportunity to heal.

Participant Jess similarly expressed:

I have one friend who is very fluid, nowadays they're non-binary. And I have always connected with this other friend, who's trans and there's an ease and an understanding of talking about things [...] talking about this feeling of homesickness that we feel, or this reality that we know is true but we don't see around.

Participant Trish, who is not completely out in her community in the U.S. as transgender, expressed longing for her LGBTQ community in the Philippines.

For two of the participants, community and community support is not necessarily found in shared identities, but in acceptance. Participant Jess shared that most of her friends are cisgender-identified, and that there is acceptance and support in her identity. Participant Yumi shared too, that her community support is found in the “company of people that [she] knows [she] can be out about being multiple and trans.” Furthermore, Participant Karine shared the importance of acceptance outside of her immediate community. She shared the experience of an older, cisgender Black female DMV employee holding her hand and saying, “I know what this is about, and Black woman, go get your life.”

For some, there were also communities and relationships that they disconnected from either actively or passively. These participants shared that they had chosen to not lean into or remain connected with communities, family or racial or environmental, that they perceived as rejecting of their identities. Participant Jess reflected:

I would say that I've done, for better or worse, a really decent job of purging my past life. I did that with my grandparents. I did that when I left for college. I have cut the majority of my friends from back home out of my life when I moved. [...] it was hard to confront these people and be honest with them. And just tell them, well, I did it for my own protection.

Participant Yumi and Participant Ayla shared similarly that they did not keep in touch with relationships or communities that were not supportive of their transgender identity. Participant Ayla additionally reflected that currently, her felt sense of lack of belonging is still very present, and she still has not found a great sense of belonging or community.

Lastly, two participants discussed the importance of cultivating sustainability in the transgender community in support of future generations. Participant Trish described her leadership and mentor role in the LGBTQ community in the Philippines and the meaningful relationship she has with the younger generation. She recalled:

This little kid, I have to give you an example, who wants to be a trans, like really wants to be a trans, he called me. I can still call him. I think he's 14 now, he was always like, "oh you're my idol. I like you because you're this. How did you do that?"

Participant Karine stated that it is about "paying the people back who did for me by extending my hand to the next person." She described the importance of continuing to build community, expanding this community, and creating space and visibility for others. She shared:

My mentor said to me, "the fact that you're out and being who you are, being Black and who you are, that's going to make a difference." She said frankly that more people within and outside of our community needs to see this [...] that's what me and my friends, we try to do, just by showing an example and being there. We are here. We are functioning.

We are your sons, we are your daughters, and we're here. And we won't be turned away.

And lastly, Participant Jess described her own intentionality for supporting the transgender community in the way she dates, noting that she makes the effort to teach and encourage her cisgender lovers to continue to date other transgender women.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to explore emergent themes in the identity development of transgender women of color. As described in the results section, several shared elements were found among participants' accounts of their experiences in their identity development as transgender women of color. This study found 6 superordinate themes and 10 subthemes. Although there was variability and differences in participants' experiences and perspectives, the identified emergent themes operated as major constructs that illustrated participants' understanding of their identity and lived experiences.

In recent years there has been a growing literature examining the identity development of racial minority identities and sexual minority identities, with Devor (2004) being the first study that examined the identity development of white transsexual persons. Current research has not yet explored the impact of holding multiple marginalized identities; as discussed in earlier chapters, it was observed that results of isolated models was two "disparate and seemingly incompatible narratives" (Huang, 2017). Intersectionality is a crucial framework to adapt when considering the various minority statuses that an individual or group may hold, specifically transgender women of color as it pertains to this study.

Superordinate themes found in this study demonstrate both similarities and differences to those themes outlined in major identity development models such as Sue's Racial Cultural Identity Model (2015) and Devor's Fourteen Stage Model of Transsexual Identity Formation. The major limitation of both of these models is that they capture only parts of the transgender woman identity experience, and do not more fully account for intersectionality of multiple minority identities. See Table 3 and Table 4 below.

**Table 3.***Comparison of IPA Emergent Themes*

Devor's Fourteen Stages	IPA Emergent Themes
Stage 1. Abiding Anxiety	Life Course Milestones
Stage 2. Identity Confusion	Life Course Milestones
Stage 3. Identity Comparison	Not found
Stage 4. Discovery of Transsexualism	Lack of Visibility and Representation
Stage 5. Identity Confusion about Transsexualism	Not found
Stage 6. Identity Comparison of Transsexualism	Not found
Stage 7. Identity Tolerance of Transsexual Identity	Not found
Stage 8. Delay Before Acceptance of Transsexual Identity	Not found
Stage 9. Acceptance	Not found
Stage 10. Delay Before Transition	Not found
Stage 11. Transition	Life Course Milestones
Stage 12. Acceptance of Post Transition Gender and Sex Identities	Life Course Milestones
Stage 13. Integration	Life Course Milestones
Stage 14. Pride	Community Support

In considering Devor's Fourteen Stage Model of Transsexual Identity Formation, this study's finding of Life Course Milestones reflected some of the early gender discrepancies and gender exploration described in Devor's Stage One labelled Abiding Anxiety and Stage Two labelled Identity Confusion. In this study, participants briefly described experiences found in Devor's Stage Four labelled Discovery of Transgenderism, which in this study was captured under the superordinate theme of Lack of Visibility and Representation superordinate theme; in this study's superordinate theme, participants discussed their discovery of transgenderism and the impact of finding language for their experiences. Stages Five to Ten in Devor's model were not evident in participants' narratives - in these stages, outlined in earlier chapters of this manuscript, Devor presents a transsexual/transgender person's identity confusion, comparison, tolerance, and eventual acceptance of transgender identities. Instead, participants of this study reported feelings of understanding and relief when discovering transgenderism and their transgender identity, and this is evident in the subthemes of superordinate theme Life Course



Milestones. And finally, participants of this study also reported experiences similar to Stages Eleven to Fourteen of Devor's model. Devor's Stage Eleven Transition is seen in this study's Life Course Milestone superordinate theme, where participants describe embarking on the processes to transition. Devor's Stage Twelve Acceptance and Stage Thirteen is also evident in the Life Course Milestone superordinate theme, where participants describe feelings of satisfaction and happiness of their gender identity, and becomes more comfortable in their new identity. And finally, Devor's Stage Fourteen Pride can be gleamed from this study's superordinate theme of Community Support, where some participants endorse feelings of pride and a desire for advocacy for their community.

**Table 4.**

*Comparison of IPA Emergent Themes*

Sue and Sue's R/CID Model	IPA Emergent Themes
Conformity	Discrimination
Dissonance	Life Course Milestones; Influence of Family, Race, and Culture; Experiences with Majority Norms; Lack of Visibility and Representation; Discrimination
Resistance and Immersion	Life Course Milestones; Influence of Family, Race, and Culture; Experiences with Majority Norms; Lack of Visibility and Representation; Discrimination
Introspection	Life Course Milestones, subtheme Transitioning
Integrative Awareness	Community Support

Superordinate themes found in this study can also be examined alongside Sue's Racial Cultural Identity Development (R/CID) Model. Sue's R/CID Model presents the following stages: Conformity, Dissonance, Resistance and Immersion, Introspection, and Integrative Awareness. In this study's superordinate theme of Discrimination, participants reported experiences of assimilating and code-switching (the practice of moving back-and-forth between

two languages or dialects), which is similar to the R/CID Conformity stage of reaction to the lifestyles and value systems of the dominant culture. It is important to acknowledge that the R/CID model speaks specifically to the demands of conforming to the dominant racial culture in the U.S., and participants of this study, based on the intersectionality of their identities, reflected on the pressures associated with the demands of both the dominant racial culture as well as the dominant cisgender heterosexual culture that they are forced to navigate. The R/CID's Dissonance stage and Resistance and Immersion stage are echoed in participants' responses a number of the themes, including: Life Course Milestones, Influence of Family, Race, and Culture, Experiences with Majority Norms, Lack of Visibility and Representation, and Discrimination. However, there are differences here based on participants' racial-cultural identity. For example, two Asian-identified and U.S. born participants reported current desires to assimilate to White culture, in part because of their proximity to Whiteness; one Asian-identified and non-U.S. born participant reported little dissonance in her experiences, although endorsed some feelings of guilt and shame at not having connected with a transgender community here in the U.S. Finally, the one Black-identified participant reported more dissonance in her racial-cultural experiences, and at one point in her life rejected more dominant views.

A majority of participants reflect experiences consistent with in R/CID's Introspection stage and Integrative Awareness stage, as they actively reflected on the balance of their commitment to majority and minority views and lifestyles, as well as their inner sense of security and pride. Participants' varying degrees of alignment with these stages were dependent on the environment they grew up in and their racial-cultural identity; as seen in the Results section above, there were striking similarities amongst the Asian-identified participants, and more

notable differences between the Asian-identified participants and the Black-identified participant. Participants also distinguished between racial-cultural majority alignment and cisgender heterosexual cultural majority alignment.

In considering the intersectionality of different identity statuses, it is important to approach this study's findings within the intersectionality framework. The intersectionality framework attempts to identify how interlocking systems of power impact those who are most marginalized in society (Chi-Rou Huang, 2017), and asserts that singular and insulated identity development models cannot capture the dynamic experiences of one's identity. The findings demonstrate that participants' experiences of their multiple identity statuses are not discrete sets of separate identities, but rather a dynamic, overlapping, and relationally-defined phenomenon (Shields, 2008).

Additionally, some participants describe the impact of their sexual preferences on their gender identity. This phenomenon has been explored in a study by Parent, DeBlaere and Moradi (2013), which found that sexual orientation and gender identity were commonly coded dichotomously in both heterosexual and non-heterosexual groups.

Finally, superordinate themes and subthemes found in this study present a similar framework of dominant versus subordinate or majority versus non-majority experiences; in this framework, those with non-majority identities work to navigate and reconcile internal and external conflicts, oppression, and discrimination. All participants of this study described their dynamic journeys in navigating their identity as transgender women of color within the dominant, White cisgender heterosexual culture, with varying degrees of conflict and reconciliation.

The results from this study suggests that an integration of Devor's and Sue and Sue's identity development models may present an exploratory, conceptual model that could capture the identity formation processes of transgender women of color. Devor's step-by-step stages of development for transgender persons is comprehensive, and clearly evident in this study's participants' experiences, as highlighted in the superordinate theme of Life Course Milestones. The Life Course Milestones subcategories of early experiences and environmental factors, transitioning, after transitioning, and dating could be considered when developing a descriptive time-line when developing a future model that captures some of Devor's model's limitations. As Devor normed his study on White participants, his model does not address the experiences of racial-cultural discrimination and dissonance. This was captured by the R/CID model, which found many similarities with this study's superordinate themes as listed above. Future researchers should consider the strengths and limitations of both models and the significance and benefits of finding integration between the two.

### **Clinical Implications**

There are several notable clinical implications that have emerged from the results of this study. This study is the first to describe and illustrate the interplay between transgender identity and race, and investigate how transgender women of color understand, construct, and develop their transgender identities in the context of other salient identities. The qualitative findings of this study suggest that while existing identity development models can capture some of this community's experiences, a framework of intersectionality is necessary to truly capture transgender women of color's full perspectives and lived experiences.

In comparison to existing models, the critical additional themes that emerged from this study highlighted the importance of visibility, representation, and community support in the face

of stigma, discrimination, and the lack of belonging in relation to majority cultural norms. Researchers and practitioners must consider the multiple minority identities that transgender women of color hold; from the minority stress perspective, this population experiences elevated risk in their environment that directly impacts their physical and mental health. One of the most prominent theoretical and explanatory frameworks of sexual minority health risk is the minority stress model. This model explains that health disparities can be explained in large part by stressors induced by a hostile, homophobic culture that “often results in a lifetime of harassment, maltreatment, discrimination, and victimization” (Marshal et al., 2008; Meyer, 2003). Existing literature illustrated the significance of social support as predictors of positive relationship functioning, resiliency, and improved psychological well-being (Hass & Lannutti, 2019). Similarly, this study’s findings emphasized how locating safe, supportive, and like-minded communities was crucial to the identity development of transgender women of color.

Participants emphasized the significance of community support to their transitioning and their lived experiences as transgender women of color. They demonstrate that identifying with a community supports the resolution of the dissonance, rejection, and loneliness felt in their earlier, often pre-transitioning, life. And finally, a few participants directly acknowledged the significance and meaningfulness of mentoring and supporting future generations. Other participants communicated to this researcher that their desire to participate in this study was the hope that their stories will serve to bring more visibility to the voices of transgender women of color, and potentially help future generations. The wish to support future generations as communicated by participants, illustrates a proactive stance of identity pride and community commitment, as well as a significant protective factor against minority stress. It is concluded

that community belonging, support, and mentorship are significant protective factors that providers should partner with in support of clients' identity validation and self-esteem.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

This study had several limitations. The current study sampled a relatively small number of individuals ( $N = 5$ ), which is ideal for an IPA investigation (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Obtaining a sample with greater racial/ethnic, gender, and age diversity was not possible given methodological limitations. This design allowed the research to spend significant amounts of time becoming immersed in the interview data and each individual's phenomenological process, but did not allow for generalizability. A larger research theme and sample size would have increased confidence in consensus (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 2005). The sample of participants was small and not necessarily representative of transgender women of color. Additionally, the challenges of recruiting from marginalized communities like LGBTQ people of color are additionally well-documented in the literature (DeBlaere, Brewster, Sarkees, & Moradi, 2010).

This study's recruitment method observed the IPA theory that homogeneity of group should be dependent on interpretative concerns, and therefore participants were recruited on a first-come, first-serve basis through purposeful sampling. The inclusion criteria provided that all participants identified as transgender women of color, though there were variations in age, racial-cultural identity, and country of origin. Four of the five participants recruited identified as Asian and one participant identified as Black. Four of the five participants were born in the United States and one of the participants was born in the Philippines and had transitioned before she moved to the United States. From the emergent superordinate themes and sub themes, it is evident that racial-cultural identity impacted participants' values and lived experiences. There

was homogeneity in the subtheme of Desire for Assimilation for the Asian-identified participants, and similarities in the superordinate theme of Experiences with Majority Norms for the U.S.-born participants. Additionally, one participant identified as a multiple person in addition to her identity as a transgender woman of color, and these experiences were not captured in this study's findings.

It is possible that if the study had interviewed a few more participants, the results might have obtained different themes. However, the strong commonality of the current emergent themes offers some assurance that many of the same findings would appear in other samples. The researcher found that the sample size of five participants generated an ample amount of qualitative data to capture a unique and intimate examination of the experience of the participants.

Recommendations for future research could include a larger sample size and a more diverse set of participants, which could have a better generalizability for the population in question. Future research should include a wider range of racial-cultural diversity, age range, education level, country of origin and immigration status, socioeconomic status, and recruitment on a wider geographic range.

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World Professional Association for Transgender Health. p. 96.

Appendix A

IRB Approval Letter

## Renewal

IRB ID: 1146  
Application Title: Emergent Themes in Identity Development for Transgender Women of Color: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis  
Year Number: 1  
Review Type: Expedited Review  
Based On:  
Due Date: 01/13/2020  
Total # Subjects Enrolled Since Last Renewal: 0  
Total # Subjects Enrolled in Study to Date: 0  
Total # Subjects Who Have Completed Study: 0  
Total # Subjects Who Have Died: 0  
Total # Subjects Still Active:  
Continuation Status: Subject Enrollment Not Yet Begun  
Date Terminated:  
Unforeseen/Adverse Events: None  
Describe Unforeseen/Adverse Events:  
Additional Comments:

*Amendment Approved*

To: Angel Tseng  
From: Richard Gregory Johnson III, IRB Chair  
Subject: Protocol #1146  
Date: 02/13/2020

Dear Angel Tseng:

Your Amendment for research (IRB Protocol #1146) with the project title **Emergent Themes in Identity Development for Transgender Women of Color: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis** has been approved by the IRB Chair on 02/13/2020.

Any modifications, adverse reactions or complications must be reported using a modification application to the IRBPHS within ten (10) working days.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRBPHS via email at [IRBPHS@usfca.edu](mailto:IRBPHS@usfca.edu). Please include the Protocol number assigned to your application in your correspondence.

On behalf of the IRBPHS committee, I wish you much success in your research.

Sincerely,

Dr. Richard Gregory Johnson III  
Professor & Chair, Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects  
University of San Francisco  
[irbphs@usfca.edu](mailto:irbphs@usfca.edu)  
[IRBPHS Website](#)



### USF IRBPHS MODIFICATION APPLICATION

Name of Applicant: Angel Tseng

USF Identification Number: 20328639

University Title: PsyD Doctoral Candidate

School or College: School of Nursing and Health Professions

Department or Group: Clinical Psychology PsyD Program

Home or Campus Address: 2130 Fulton St, San Francisco, CA 94117

Home Phone: 415-828-0747

Work Phone: 415-828-0747

Electronic Mail Address(s): atseng4@dons.usfca.edu

Name(s) and University Title(s) of Other Investigators:

Primary Investigator: Angel Tseng, University of San Francisco (No secondary investigators)

Name of Faculty Advisor: Dr. Brent Rick Ferm

University Title: Full-Time Faculty

Home or Campus Address: 2130 Fulton St, San Francisco, CA 94117

Home or Campus Phone: 415-279-7782

Electronic Mail Address(s): brferm@usfca.edu

IRBPHS Number: IRB ID #: 1146

Project Title:

Emergent Themes in Identity Development of Transgender Women of Color: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

*Respond to items 1 - 5 on separate sheets of white paper, single-sided, typed in black ink and using*

standard 12 point font. Responses to items 1 - 5 should be stapled to this Modification Application form.

1. Description of Proposed Change(s) to Research Protocol

I would like to include video interview to the research protocol. I have selected VSee, a HIPPA compliant Telemedicine platform to protect the privacy and confidentiality of participants.

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3. Rationale for Proposed Changes

Including the option of video interviews will broaden the participant pool and make the study more accessible to participate for those with time or geographical restrictions.

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3. Impact on Potential Risks to Human Subjects

The inclusion of video interview will have no impact on potential risks to human subjects. The platform is HIPPA compliant and a vetted and trusted platform used for Telemedicine and Research since 2008.

4. Minimization of Increased Potential Risk

Video interview participants will receive the same document containing the resources to mental health services should they be interested upon completion (or premature termination) of the study.

5. Impact on Potential Benefits to Human Subjects      The same benefits apply to video interview participants. Participants will benefit from actively contributing their experiences and narratives, in a safe and confidential way, to the growing literature on supporting transgender women of color. Participants will be given the option to see the completed dissertation should they be interested.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Angel Tseng (Electronic signature, 02/10/20)

Signature of Applicant

Date



2/10/20

Signature of Faculty Advisor\*

Date

\*Your signature indicates that you accept responsibility for the research described, including work by students under your supervision.

## Appendix B

### Recruitment flyer

**PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR RESEARCH  
FOR TRANSGENDER WOMEN OF COLOR**

Do you identify as a **trans woman of color**?

Are you willing to **share your story confidentially** as part of a research study?

Participation in this study will involve an in-depth interview lasting approximately 1-2 hours, depending on the level of detail you are able or willing to provide. If interested in this study, please contact me below. Interested individuals will complete a brief survey that will take approximately 5 minutes to determine if you meet criteria for the study

Your participation is entirely voluntary and you must be  
at least 18 years of age to participate.

For more information or to volunteer for the study,  
please contact me directly:

Angel Tseng, M.S.  
Clinical Psychology Psy.D. Candidate  
University of San Francisco  
atseng4@dons.usfca.edu

## Appendix C

### Informed Consent



**CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY**

Below is a description of the research procedures and an explanation of your rights as a research participant. You should read this information carefully. If you agree to participate, you will sign in the space provided to indicate that you have read and understand the information on this consent form. You are entitled to and will receive a copy of this form.

You have been asked to participate in a research study conducted by Angel Tseng, a clinical psychology doctoral student in the School of Nursing and Health Professions at UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO. This faculty supervisor for this study is Konjit V. Page, PhD, a professor in the Clinical Psychology PsyD Program at UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO.

**WHAT THE STUDY IS ABOUT:**

The purpose of this research study is to explore the life experiences of transgender women of color. This study seeks to discover how members of this community come to understand their identity and how members make meaning out of different lived experiences.

**WHAT WE WILL ASK YOU TO DO:**

During this study, I will ask you to complete a brief screening questionnaire that can be completed over the phone or in person. This questionnaire will ask for basic demographic information such as your name, age, racial identity, and gender identity. Then, some participants will be invited for a full interview which will last approximately 1-2 hours, depending on how much you are willing and able to share with me about your experiences. You have the right not to answer any interview questions, and to stop the interviews at any time. Interviews will be audio-recorded and later transcribed. All transcripts will be de-identified, without any identifying information such as your name or contact information. Audio recordings are necessary for the researcher to analyze the data in-depth at a later time.

**DURATION AND LOCATION OF THE STUDY:**

Your participation in this study will involve one initial brief screening questionnaire over the phone, lasting between 5 to 10 minutes. The full interview will involve one session that lasts between 1-2 hours. This study will take place at an office space at an agreed upon location convenient to you.

**POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS:**

The research procedures described above may involve the following minimal risks and/or discomforts including potential discomfort, as talking about one's life experiences and challenges may bring up difficult emotions or unpleasant memories for some individuals. If you have any concerns before or after participating, please do not hesitate to contact the researcher at the phone number or email address below. A list of mental health resources will be available to you from the beginning of the study. If you wish, you may choose to withdraw your consent and discontinue your participation at any time during the study without penalty.

**BENEFITS:**

You will receive no direct benefit from your participation in this study; however, the possible benefits to others is that information from this study may benefit other people now or in the

future. We hope to learn more about the experiences and challenges faced by transgender women of color so that better resources can be available in the future.

**PRIVACY/CONFIDENTIALITY:**

Any data you provide in this study will be kept confidential unless disclosure is required by law. In any report we publish, we will not include information that will make it possible to identify you or any individual participant. Specifically, all data collected will be secured in password-protected, encrypted computer files. All of your responses to interview questions will remain anonymous. No one other than the researcher will have access to your interview responses or your contact information. If you participate in the full interview, I would like to audio record your responses anonymously. Audio recordings will be stored in a lock-protected cabinet where only the primary investigator will have the key. Recordings will be deleted upon completion of the study. The interview will not be recorded without your permission. Please let me know if you do not want the interview to be recorded. Any identifiable data will be destroyed upon completion of the study. Consent forms will be destroyed 3 years after completion of the study.

**COMPENSATION/PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION:**

There is no payment or other form of compensation for your participation in this study.

**VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY:**

Your participation is voluntary and you may refuse to participate without penalty or loss of benefits. Furthermore, you may skip any questions or tasks that make you uncomfortable and may discontinue your participation at any time. In addition, the researcher has the right to withdraw you from participation in the study at any time.

**OFFER TO ANSWER QUESTIONS:**

Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you should contact the principal investigator: Angel Tseng at [atseng4@dons.usfca.edu](mailto:atseng4@dons.usfca.edu). If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact the University of San Francisco Institutional Review Board at [IRBPHS@usfca.edu](mailto:IRBPHS@usfca.edu).

**I HAVE READ THE ABOVE INFORMATION. ANY QUESTIONS I HAVE ASKED HAVE BEEN ANSWERED. I AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT AND I WILL RECEIVE A COPY OF THIS CONSENT FORM.**

---

*PARTICIPANT'S SIGNATURE*

*DATE*

## Appendix D

### Screening Interview Script

Before we begin, I would like to review some information about this study and your rights as a prospective participant. [Read consent letter.]

Now I am going to ask you some questions. You may answer as few or as many as you like. Remember that your participation is voluntary.

1. How do you identify your gender?
2. How old are you?
3. What is your race and/or ethnicity?
4. What languages were spoken in your home growing up?
5. To what extent have you thought about your gender identity and racial identity?
6. Would you be comfortable sharing your story confidentially?
7. May I contact you for a full interview? (Approximately 90 minutes)

Appendix E  
Interview Schedule

**Introduction and Mapping**

1. How would you describe yourself as a person? What do you think are some of your most important characteristics? What parts of your identity stand out to you and/or those around you the most?
2. Can you walk me through a timeline beginning with your birth up to your current age? Along the way, mark any important or defining moments in your gender identity, expression, sex assignment, and sexual identity development. (Have participant draw out basic map)
  - 2a. Which ones stood out to you?
  - 2b. What thoughts or realizations do you have in reflecting on this timeline?
3. Is there anything else that you liked to add from (adolescent, childhood, young adulthood)?
4. How do you identify racially/ethnically?
5. Can you tell me about your family's cultural background?

**Memorable Milestones and Defining Moments**

1. When did you first notice the impact your gender has had on your identity and experiences?
2. When did you first notice the impact your race has had on your identity and experiences?
  - 1a. When did it become a significant part of your identity? If it did?
3. What kinds of influences did you have growing up and how did this impact your idea of gender? (and race?)
4. What aspects of your culture are you most proud of? (Ethnic/racial culture or gender culture?)
5. What feelings did you have towards white values and ways throughout your life?
6. What feelings did you have towards gender and gender roles throughout your life?
7. Was there a profound event or crisis that challenged your previous mode of thinking on race? On gender?

8. What kinds of ideals or values have you internalized from white culture? From heteronormative/cis-normative culture?
9. Was there a particular moment or time where you felt different than others or the world you observe around you?
10. What attitudes or beliefs do you have about your identity? (probe racial identity and gender identity; physical or cultural characteristics)

**Relationships with others**

1. What attitudes or beliefs do you have towards members of your community?
2. Who have you surrounded yourself with throughout your life?
3. Can you tell me about your romantic relationships throughout your life?
4. What do others in your life know about your identity? How have others responded to your identity expression or identity? (funneling questions)
5. Do you feel a sense of belonging? What about through different points in your life?

**Challenges and obstacles**

1. Can you tell me some common everyday challenges you face?
2. Have you ever experienced any identity conflicts? Can you tell me about them? How did you resolve this conflict, or how do you still plan on resolving or exploring it?
3. Was there an obstacle in your life that really stood out to you?

**Reflections & Meaning**

1. What does your gender identity mean to you? Your racial/ethnic identity? Your cultural identity?
2. How do you think others see you? What do you think informs their perceptions of you? Do you find this accurate? What do you wish you could change?
3. How much did you think about your gender and racial identity? (before this interview)
4. What is your relationship like with your body? Has this changed over time?

**Closing**

1. What do you appreciate or love about yourself?
2. How do you make sense of this experience (of positive change / growth)?

3. How do you envision your future?
4. What might you tell a younger version of yourself today?
5. Do you have any wisdom, advice, or lessons that you would pass onto others?
6. Is there anything else that you would like to share with me about your experiences and their impact on you—positively or negatively?



Appendix F  
Study Timeline

1. Dissertation Proposal – Completed by September 6, 2018
2. IRB Application Submission – Completed by September 28, 2018
3. Communication and partnership with aforementioned agencies (API Center and Oakland LGBTQ Center) for recruitment – Established by September 28, 2018
4. IRB Approval – Speculated to receive by October 31, 2018
5. Recruitment process – Completed by November 30, 2018
6. Data Collection – To take place from February 1 to March 31, 2019
7. Data Analysis and Results – Completed by May 1, 2019
8. Dissertation Defense – Completed by June 30, 2019